

eHealth solution: A youth mental health self-referral service

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The University of Montreal Hospital Research Centre (CRCHUM) has received grants totalling \$1.075 million to conduct a pilot program aiming to improve access to mental health services for youth.

In Canada, 75% of youth aged 11 to 25 with [mental health](#) problems do not have access to the services they need. "They often face excessive wait times and complex pathways to services, which discourage young people from taking the steps needed for receiving appropriate assessment and care," explains Shalini Lal, a researcher at CRCHUM and professor at the University of Montreal.

Given that one in five people will be affected by mental illness during their lifetime and that most mental illnesses occur before the age of 25, young people are particularly vulnerable. "New technologies can be useful to ensure that their initial access to care experience is positive," said Lal. "If young people are greeted by an answering machine or have to explain to several people why they are consulting, it can increase their psychological distress and discourage them from seeking the help they need."

To tackle this problem, Lal will oversee the development and evaluation of an innovative self-referral strategy to improve direct and rapid access to youth mental health services using online technologies. "Young people can complete a referral form themselves on a secure platform. The form will be integrated with an electronic referral management system which will help a clinician triage requests and give appointments for

consultations in person, by phone, live chat, or video conference, depending on the youths' preferred mode of communication. We believe the use of new technologies will facilitate access to care and empower young people to undertake the initial process of consultation themselves," said the principal investigator of the project.

The researchers established a partnership with Kids Help Phone, which provides a 24/7/365 youth support service. Since 2011, Kids Help Phone has operated a live chat service with counsellors for young people. "It has been observed that those who choose this means of communication are often in great distress, sometimes even suicidal. Maybe they feel that online chatting protects their privacy because they can decide on the information they want to provide and have better control over their emotions. This is something we will evaluate in the study," said the researcher.

The project is funded by the Canadian government through a \$750,000 grant over four years from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research as part of the eHealth Innovations Partnership Program. The Graham Boeckh Foundation is also investing \$325,000, bringing the total funding to \$1.075 million. The research team plans to launch its [pilot program](#) within a year. It will include a web portal to facilitate self-referral, a secure communication platform, and a referral management system for health professionals. The ultimate goal is to facilitate direct [access](#) to public mental health services for young people and empower them in the initial consultation process.

The eHealth Solution will be tested in six sites in Canada: CLSC Dorval-Lachine (CSSS de Dorval-Lachine-LaSalle, Montréal, Québec), CLSC Parc-Extension (CSSS de la Montagne, Montréal, Québec), Chatham-Kent Health Alliance (Chatham, Ontario), Alberta Health Services and CASA (Edmonton, Alberta), Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay (Eeyou Istchee Cree Territory, Québec), and Eskasoni

Mental Health & Social Work Services (Mi'kmmaw Eskasoni First Nation, Nova Scotia). These sites are participating members of ACCESS Open Minds, a pan-Canadian, 200-member network of youth, families, service providers, researchers, decision makers, and community organizations. A key partner in the project, the Canadian company Strata Health Solutions, will develop the referral management system and provide support in health technologies.

Provided by University of Montreal

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