



Women's Age Lab

IMPACT REPORT

2022/2023

Women's College Hospital is a world leader in health for women, health equity and health system solutions – a hospital designed to keep people out of hospital. As an academic organization, fully affiliated with the University of Toronto, we know that research and innovation are critical components towards advancing our mission of creating a healthier more equitable world.

Message from the Founding Director



Women's Age Lab had a successful second year, and we are pleased to share our 2022-2023 annual impact report with you and highlight the team's accomplishments and exciting work.

We are proud of the growth of Women's Age Lab over the past year, with the addition of many new staff members and scientists, and embarking on exciting, multi-year research projects. In particular, Women's Age Lab, along with partners, was awarded six years of federal funding to support research on identifying new solutions to promote healthy aging at the population-level within Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities.

Our busy year included many initiatives to promote the health and well-being of older women, starting with our campaign to raise awareness about gendered ageism, wrapping up our intersectoral collaboration on addressing loneliness with a virtual workshop series to promote digital literacy for older adults, and our ongoing international work to reduce prescribing cascades and increase medication safety.

We built Women's Age Lab on conversations with healthcare leaders, clinicians, and, most importantly, older women. Through continued conversations, we have refined our priorities. Previously discrete, but interconnected, our areas of focus were: addressing gendered ageism, reimagining aging in place and congregate care, optimizing therapies, and promoting social connectedness.

Over the last year, we have realized that addressing gendered ageism is a thread that connects and impacts all our work with older women. We have updated our research priorities to include this way of thinking. You will see our updated model on page three.

We are excited for the year ahead and look forward to continuing our research by creating a space for national and international collaboration to improve the lives of older adults, specifically women.

Thank you for your support,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paula Rochon".

Paula Rochon, MD, MPH, FRCPC

Founding Director, Women's Age Lab

Senior Scientist, Women's College Hospital

Professor, Division of Geriatric Medicine, Department of Medicine and Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and RTOERO

Chair in Geriatric Medicine, University of Toronto

Message from the Advisory Council Chairs

On behalf of the Advisory Council, we are delighted to celebrate this successful, and impactful year for Women's Age Lab.

Women's Age Lab has embarked upon exciting work in Year Two across the three priority areas, while emphasizing the importance of addressing gendered ageism throughout. This includes continued alignment with international initiatives, addressing aging in place through their study on Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, reducing loneliness by promoting social connectedness with digital literacy workshops, and improving the way we prescribe for older people, particularly women.

We know that older women have unique health and social needs, but they are often overlooked by researchers, care providers, and policy planners. Through their work, Women's Age Lab is addressing an important research gap that still exists within health and social-care.

Women's Age Lab was founded to address critical issues facing women as they age, working towards a world where science is used to recognize and address the unique health and well-being needs of older women, and we look forward to supporting the continued work of the lab in advancing science and research.



Dr. Gillian Hawker

*Sir John and Lady Eaton Professor and Chair of the Department of Medicine, University of Toronto
Senior Scientist, Women's College Research Institute*



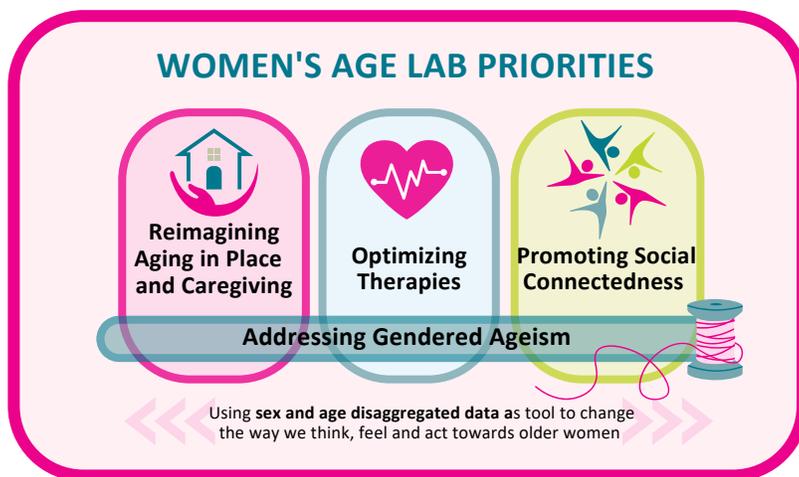
Dr. Jerry H. Gurwitz

*The Dr. John Meyers Professor of Primary Care Medicine
Professor of Medicine, Family Medicine and Community Health, and
Population & Quantitative Health Sciences
Chief, Division of Geriatric Medicine
UMass Chan Medical School and UMass Memorial Medical Center*

Our Mission

To improve the lives of older women by using science to transform care and practice, and drive health system and social change.

Women's Age Lab (WAL) is a space for exploration and collaboration on science-driven health and social change that will improve the lives of older women. To our knowledge it is the first and only research centre of its kind in the world. Women's Age Lab plays a critical role in advancing Women's College Hospital's vision for a healthier, more equitable world. Women's Age Lab was built upon conversation, learning and engagement with healthcare leaders, researchers and community partners, and most importantly women, and the realization that, despite their unique health needs, they were primarily missing from the picture. This work established and defined our priorities. We continue to leverage partnerships and collaboration to achieve the greatest impact and do so through our large network of stakeholders across sectors, including our international advisory council.



Follow the thread throughout this report to see the importance addressing **gendered ageism** in all of our work.



Reimagining Aging in Place and Caregiving

to ensure that the specific needs of older women are addressed whether they are living at home or in long-term care. WAL scientists are raising awareness of the needs of caregivers and strengthening support for caregivers, most being women.

We are addressing this pillar with our research into **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, or NORCs (p. 4)**. WAL scientists held leadership roles on the **Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table (p. 7)**, raising awareness of the important issues for those in living in long-term care homes through the Congregate Care Setting Working Group.



Optimizing Therapies

to reduce the incidence of adverse drug effects on older women. Our **iKascade Study (p. 6)** has shown that sex and gender-related variables play a important role in prescribing decisions.



Promoting Social Connectedness

by developing strategies to foster social interactions. This year we completed an Intersectoral Collaboration to better understand **loneliness in older adults (p. 5)** and hosted **Digital Literacy Workshops (p. 7)** to connect older adults to online services and facilitate social connections.



Many older women live in buildings or neighbourhoods that have a higher concentration of older people.

NORCS

This year, our proposal to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) was **ranked first** amongst the competition, which highlights the importance of our research and our cross-disciplinary partnerships. With these grants we will study how to reimagine aging in place and examine innovative solutions to help older adults, particularly women, age well in the community.

Our research focuses on **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCS)**. NORCs are generally a high-rise apartment or condo building where 30% or more are older residents, mostly women. There are about **2,000 NORCs in Ontario alone**. Many people living in apartments or condos don't really know their neighbours, but want a greater sense of community. We have seen this first-hand when we visit some of these NORC buildings and talk to residents.

Offering enhanced supports within NORCs is a **low-cost approach** to support healthy aging that bridges connections between older adults and their communities and creates a space where external resources can have a bigger impact. Examples of the interventions we are interested in studying include: looking at the role of on-site staff with specialized training and recreation coordination, the implementation of mobile integrated health units to support distinct clinical needs, in-unit support for virtual care, and dedicated spaces for social and health programming.

Women's Age Lab, along with partners from the NORC Innovation Centre, the City of Toronto, the City of Barrie, Public Health Units, Barrie Housing and the Toronto and Barrie public libraries are embarking upon a **six year research study** to support the implementation and evaluation of NORCs with enhanced services across **10 sites in Ontario**. We want to see if these enhanced services allow older adults to stay socially connected and remain in their homes longer.

We hope our initiative will help establish a model for others to follow that will improve the quality of life for older adults, especially women, as they age in place.

Reimagining Aging in Place and Caregiving



Promoting Social Connectedness



LONELINESS

This year we completed our work with our **Intersectoral Collaboration** dedicated to addressing loneliness in older adults. From this collaboration with **14 different partners**, we drafted a **policy brief and a paper** to profile the work and experience of the group. We also introduced our work to policy makers at **provincial and national levels**. From our research, we developed a series of **workshops (more on p. 7)** to help give older adults the opportunity to develop their digital literacy skills.

Defined as an emotional state of perceived social isolation, loneliness impacts health among older adults, especially women. Of the 6.5 million older adults in Canada, we know that **2x more women live alone**. People who live alone are more likely to be lonely. Loneliness is comparable to **smoking 15 cigarettes a day**, and most recently, the US Surgeon General declared rebuilding social connections as a top public health priority for the United States.

We all know that being connected to family, friends, neighbours, and community is good for us, and this is especially true for improving the health and wellbeing of older adults.

At Women's Age Lab, we are working to better understand the experience of loneliness in older people, but especially for older women, and develop and share new ideas and strategies to help address this pressing issue. Recently, two studies led by our trainees studied the factors associated with loneliness in immigrants and explored the relationship between loneliness and polypharmacy using ICES population-based data of older adults living in Ontario, Canada.



Promoting Social
Connectedness



Reimagining Aging in
Place and Caregiving



40% of women
living alone are
lonely.



iKASCADE STUDY

Our research has shown that **sex and gender-related variables play an important role in prescribing decisions** for older adults. This has crucial implications in understanding medication appropriateness and the promotion of more equitable healthcare outcomes. Through iKASCADE, our international project supported by GenderNet Plus and national funders, we engaged **partners in Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Italy, and the USA** to identify key prescribing cascades and explore international differences in the way medications are prescribed to women and men and the manner in which potentially inappropriate prescribing is recognized. The purpose is to improve medication safety for older adults by addressing prescribing cascades through a sex and gender lens.

We recently completed the vignette portion of this study, conducting an innovative and comprehensive multi-site analysis utilizing the “**think aloud**” interviewing technique, which aimed to explore conscious and unconscious thought processes of physicians when prescribing medications to their older adult patients across two countries. Our results will offer valuable insights into how gender biases along with the prescriber’s sex may affect prescribing practices and explore potential gender-related explanations for differences observed in the frequency of prescribing cascades in older men and women.

This research contributes to the global understanding of **gender bias in healthcare**. It paves the way for the **development of targeted interventions** to address these biases and encourages further investigation into the influence of cultural factors.

This international collaboration represents a notable achievement for Women's Age Lab, underlining the importance of **a cross-cultural perspective** in our research, and highlights the potential of these collaborations in optimizing the way drug therapies are prescribed globally for older adults.

Chronic use of “potentially inappropriate medications” is **HIGHEST** amongst **OLDER WOMEN** aged 85+



"All of the topics were relevant and the workshop was informative."

"The instructor was pleasant and answered all the questions."
Workshop Participants



Women tend to use more digital tools, but our rapid acceleration online is leaving them behind.

DIGITAL LITERACY WORKSHOPS

This year we held a series of **10 webinars** to help older adults develop their digital literacy skills. Through these webinars we aimed to help **improve adults' digital literacy skills, increase their willingness to adopt virtual care, and provide opportunities for social interaction and community.** These workshops were developed in direct response to our research into **loneliness in older adults (p. 4).**



Promoting Social Connectedness

Women are 2x more likely to enter long term care.



Reimagining Aging in Place and Caregiving

ONTARIO COVID-19 SCIENCE ADVISORY TABLE

Over the last year, Drs. Paula Rochon and Nathan Stall helped advise the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. Dr. Rochon was a member of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table, a member of the COVID-19 Ontario Census Modelling Table, and chaired the Ontario COVID-19 Congregate Care working group until it was dissolved in September 2022. Dr. Stall served as the Assistant Scientific Director for the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. Drs. Rochon and Stall with the Women's Age Lab Team's support **committed hundreds of hours** to informing the provincial COVID-19 pandemic response in Ontario and nationally, they led and contributed to a series of **Science Briefs generating tens of thousands of views**, as well as **peer-reviewed publications, and federally funded grants.** In May 2023, Drs. Rochon and Stall were awarded the **University of Toronto President's Impact Award**, along with the leadership of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, for **outstanding contributions and dedication** to supporting evidence-informed decision making and response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario and nationally.

OUR IMPACT



Our research has been disseminated in **academic journals** such as *The Lancet* and leading aging-focused journals with 20 thousand+ views on our publications.



We were awarded 6 years of **federal grant funding** from CIHR and PHAC to support novel work on reimagining aging in place.



We presented at national and international **academic conferences**.



We **collaborated** with aging-focused organizations such as RTOERO, SE Health, the International Federation of Ageing, HelpAge Canada.



We participated in over 200 minutes of **podcast** content.



Our work was profiled in national and international **news media** outlets, such as *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, and NPR reaching over 12 million+ weekly readers.



We made over 24 thousand+ **social media** impressions monthly.



We are at the forefront of **training** the next generation of scientists, focusing on women and aging.

We made the June 2023 cover of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* and were the Editor's Choice article.



THE LANCET

Scan the QR code to read Founding Director Dr. Paula Rochon's Profile in *The Lancet*.



Accolades

Our trainees have been recognized with **prestigious research awards** from the University of Toronto, the Canadian Geriatric Society (CGS), and federal funding agencies, including highly competitive CIHR awards and scholarships.

Notably, one of our trainees received the **Edmund V. Cowdry Award** for best scientific presentation by a graduate student at the CGS Meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOLLOW US FOR OUR LATEST WORK!



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