Dr. Sharon Koehn (Gerontology, SFU and Providence Health Care) has been awarded $8000 by the SSHRC-funded Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) Partnership to conduct a pilot study entitled, ‘Meanings attributed to Family Councils and related concepts by immigrant residents of long-term care and their family carers’ (Sept. 2015-June 2016). Co-investigators are Dr. Jennifer Baumbusch (Nursing, UBC) and Dr. Colin Reid (Health and Exercise Sciences, UBC-Okanagan). This team is also conducting a quantitative study, led by Dr. Baumbusch, that that seeks to identify what Family Councils look like as they are being rolled out across the province.

Over 250,000 frail, older Canadians, 70% of whom have dementia, live in residential long-term care (RLTC). Upon having a relative move into RLTC, family members shift from being “caregiver” to being “visitor”, or outsider, in the facility. This sudden and dramatic role change can be challenging for family members, who often experience dissatisfaction with the quality and amount of communication from staff about their relative, lack input and control over care decisions, and feel disempowered. Yet there remains a paucity of research on the role of families in institutional settings, such as RLTC, particularly with respect to Family Councils, which are defined as independent, self-determining groups comprised of residents’ family members who have assembled with the main purpose of protecting and improving the quality of life of those living in RLTC.

Family Councils are shown to increase and enhance family inclusion, provide emotional support for family members who are transitioning out of their roles of primary caregivers, and are effective as a means of conflict resolution for families of residents. They help families to overcome barriers to advocacy that arise from their perceptions about their lack of insider information and from concerns that they may further jeopardize quality of care by speaking out. However, there is currently no research on Family Council involvement or perceptions of immigrant seniors/families in RLTC.

Understanding the relevance of Family Councils to immigrant seniors in RLTC and their family members is critical for two reasons. First, RLTC is less accessible to immigrant seniors due in large part to the incompatibility between their cultural mores and those of most RLTC facilities which are designed in accordance with dominant (Eurocentric) cultural norms. The second impetus for this study is that we need to know how immigrant seniors in RLTC and their families understand the constructs of and the relationships between ‘Family Councils’ and ‘family inclusion’, ‘quality of life’, and ‘quality of care’ in the context of RLTC in British Columbia.


