

# OMA Physician Health Program 2003 annual report

by Sarah Hutchison  
OMA Physician Health Program

**T**he OMA Physician Health Program (PHP) — a confidential service for physicians at risk of, or suffering from, substance use and/or psychiatric disorders, and other stress, emotional or family problems — has completed its eighth full year of operation.

The PHP caseload continues to increase, as does the program's ability to offer a range of services and resources to physicians, their families, and other health professionals who require assistance (note: the PHP recently entered into agreement with the College of Veterinarians of Ontario to offer CVO members a range of services. See page 41 for further details).

During 2003, the PHP opened 260 new cases involving physicians, family members, and other health professionals experiencing distress. This represents a 25 per cent increase in new cases over the preceding year. Since the launch of the program in late 1995, the PHP has been contacted by approximately 1,100 physicians practising in Ontario.

While the PHP initially focused on providing services for problems related to drug or alcohol use, more than 65 per cent of cases opened in 2003 identify psychiatric, stress, emotional and family issues as the primary reason for seeking assistance — an increase of 15 per cent over

2002 for the same problem types.

This trend has continued for the past four years, and has resulted in the PHP seeking additional resources to better assist physicians experiencing these problems, and to more actively promote physician health and wellness initiatives.

Callers who are experiencing psychiatric, emotional, and stress-related problems receive brief assessment and advice by the PHP, followed by a referral for service.

The PHP began 2003 with 70 physicians and veterinarians enrolled in comprehensive substance dependence, substance abuse, or psychiatric monitoring programs.

Over the course of the year, 23 physicians and two veterinarians enrolled with the program, while 17 physicians completed their contracts, and five physicians left the program for other reasons.

At the end of 2003, the PHP had 73 participants enrolled in a monitoring program. The PHP offers monitoring for individuals in recovery

from substance dependence, and a "diagnostic monitoring," or substance abuse program, designed to help those health professionals who may be inappropriately using drugs or alcohol, but who are not dependent or addicted to these substances.

Fifteen of the 25 new monitoring contracts that the PHP entered into last year were for physicians with a primary psychiatric diagnosis; the remaining 10 monitoring contracts were for individuals who were diagnosed as substance-dependent.

While the PHP operates completely at arms-length from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO), the success of the PHP's ability to offer intervention, assessment and advocacy monitoring depends on the CPSO's understanding, support and acceptance of the program. In particular, the support of the CPSO staff, executive and council, primarily in the registration and investigation functions of the College, has enabled the PHP to achieve a balance between the needs of the physician experiencing a problem, and the need to ensure ongoing public safety.

The positive collaboration between the PHP and the CPSO in the design of the program has been critical in enabling the PHP to discuss and promote this service model with other health professions. While this program runs completely independently of the regulatory body, it is able to fulfil a necessary accountability to the regulator.

**Professionals Health Program:  
Ontario veterinarians**

The end of 2003 marked the first full year of operation of the "Professionals Health Program."

In 2002, the PHP entered into agreement with the College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO) to provide the province's veterinarians with the range of services offered to physicians. This exciting partnership between the Physician Health Program, CVO, and Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA), gave rise to the Professionals Health Program.

During the course of 2003, the OVMA began promoting this service to veterinarians through articles included in its association publication, and by posting information on its Web site.

The OVMA will continue to provide education and resources regarding risk recognition and impairment to veterinarians throughout the province.

In 2003, a total of 13 veterinarians contacted the Professionals Health Program seeking assistance for a range of concerns. The PHP entered into contractual monitoring with two veterinarians for substance dependence, bringing the total of monitored veterinarians to four by the end of the year.

**Research and evaluation: understanding the needs of women physicians**

The PHP's random survey of Ontario women physicians, which was initiated in September 2002 by graduate social work student Evie Moukas, under the supervision of PHP case manager Ann Davidson, was completed in April 2003.

Included in the survey were questions regarding use of alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescription drugs, as well as a section on help-seeking behaviours, sources of support, and barriers (if any) to seeking assistance.

A response rate of 58 per cent (456 completed questionnaires) was achieved. Dr. Joan Brewster (PhD) consulted in the final analysis and documentation of the results.

Following are some highlights from the survey:

- Eighty per cent of respondents reported consuming alcohol in the year prior to the survey, but few had consumed five or more drinks per occasion.
- Fewer than five per cent of respondents reported smoking tobacco.
- Less than one per cent reported using illicit drugs in the month prior to the survey, and none reported daily use.
- Fewer than five per cent of respondents reported ever having a drug use problem or dependence. The majority of these respondents had not sought treatment.
- Rates of drug use, drug problems, and dependence among Ontario women physicians are lower than those of U.S. physicians (gender combined), but are consistent with the data available from previous studies of women physicians.
- The under-representation of women in the PHP monitoring contracts might be due, in part, to their low rates of drug use.
- With regard to lifestyle choices,

women physicians may also serve as positive role models to their colleagues, patients, and society.

The results of the second part of the survey, which looked at help-seeking behaviours for alcohol and drug problems, and other non-alcohol-related emotional or stress problems, were published in the November 2003 *Ontario Medical Review* (Vol. 70, No. 10, pp. 41-43. This article is posted online at [www.oma.org](http://www.oma.org)).

Results from this section of the survey indicate that most women physicians are willing to use informal, personal support systems when in need. Approximately half of the respondents indicated that "getting time off work" would be the biggest obstacle in seeking help.

Several areas were identified as worthy of further study, including why women physicians are more prepared to refer a colleague to the PHP than call on their own behalf; why those in general/family medicine are more likely to reach out for help than those in other specialties; and examining the suggested perception that the needs of the families and patients

of women physicians take precedence over their own needs.

The PHP will continue its work to learn more about ways to best meet the personal needs of Ontario's women doctors.

### Service expansion: OMA District 11

In 2001, the PHP initiated a project in OMA District 4 (Hamilton) based on a model of decentralizing services to physicians in Ontario — for problems other than drugs and alcohol — using local resources catalogued by a co-ordinator.

In 2003, this model was modified and implemented in OMA District 11 (Toronto). The Toronto Physician Health Project, a collaboration between District 11 and the Physician Health Program, was launched in October 2003.

Two part-time physician co-ordinators, Dr. Tatyana Barankin (psychiatry) and Dr. Michael Paré (GP psychotherapy), in conjunction with District 11 consultant Kathy Bugeja, comprise the Toronto project team.

Currently, the Toronto Physician Health Project team is concentrating on building and augmenting the Toronto resource network that assists the Physician Health Program.

### Presentations and workshops

The PHP continues to offer educational presentations and workshops that are designed to promote self-care for physicians, identify and reduce the risk of physician impairment, reduce the stigma associated with seeking assistance, and provide support for colleagues and physicians' families who may be suffering.

PHP medical director Dr. Michael Kaufmann, and program staff, have delivered numerous presentations to national and international audiences, which include hospital administrators and board members, medical staff, medical students, residents and spouses, university faculty members, and physicians.

These presentations cover a variety of topics, including risk recognition, responding to colleagues in distress, impairment, medical error, overcom-

ing isolation, and "re-humanizing" the medical professional.

### CareerCycles

CareerCycles is an initiative which focuses on physician career renewal in a unique format, combining physical activity with a country retreat.

In 2003, the Physician Health Program partnered with CareerCycles to deliver two, three-day "getaways." These events were led by Mary M. Wheeler, RN, MEd, and Mark Franklin, MEd, PEng, both experienced career transition professionals.

According to evaluation forms completed by participants, many found the program to be excellent. Most cited the combination of the physical activity (biking and hiking) with the country retreat in Prince Edward County (two hours east of Toronto), as integral to their ability to enter into difficult work/life conversations.

Based on the success of the 2003 initiative, three CareerCycles Getaways (two for individuals and one for couples) are planned for 2004.

### CMA Centre for Physician Health and Well-Being established in 2003

Last year also marked the launch of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) Centre for Physician Health and Well-Being.

The CMA Centre functions as a clearinghouse and co-ordinating body to provide information to physicians, physicians-in-training, and their families. It is intended to support and complement the work of provincial and territorial physician health programs.

The Centre's four key areas of focus include health promotion and disease prevention, awareness and education, advocacy and leadership, and research and data collection.

Resources for the Centre for Physician Health and Well-Being are accessible via the CMA Web site ([www.cma.ca](http://www.cma.ca)), or by calling 1-877-CMA-4-YOU (1-877-262-4968).

The CMA also recently published the *CMA Guide to Physician Health and Well-Being*, which contains facts, advice and resources for Canadian

doctors, as well as a directory of physician support programs across Canada. Dr. Kaufmann is a member of the Centre's advisory committee.

### The Canadian Physician Health Network

The Canadian Physician Health Network (CPHN) was created in 2001, with the support of the Canadian Medical Association.

The CPHN represents an informal alliance of the CMA, divisional and physician support program staff representatives, representatives from the Canadian Association of Interns and Residents, and the Canadian Federation of Medical Students.

The purpose of the CPHN is to develop and strengthen a network of informed individuals involved with the physician health initiative.

In 2003, Dr. Kaufmann assumed the role of chair of CPHN for a two-year term. The work of CPHN illustrates the close and supportive relationships among physician support programs across Canada.

### Acknowledgments

The PHP thankfully acknowledges the OMA Executive, Board and Council in providing the resources necessary to better serve Ontario physicians.

The PHP is appreciative of the full support of the OMA staff, including the Professional Services Department, its Executive Director Dr. Michael Thoburn, and OMA Chief Executive Officer David Pattenden.

### Summary

Last year marked another extraordinary year of growth for the PHP on a number of fronts. The program has experienced a significant increase in the number of individuals seeking assistance, along with a corresponding increase in the number and scope of resources the PHP is able to offer.

To obtain further information about the Physician Health Program and its services, or a copy of the full PHP annual report, contact the program toll-free at 1-800-851-6606, or visit the PHP Web site ([www.phpoma.org](http://www.phpoma.org)).