

WRONG DIAGNOSIS?

Assessing the Accuracy of Asthma Diagnoses in Canada

THE CHALLENGE

More than 2.5 million Canadians had asthma in 2011, according to Statistics Canada. Or did they? Dr. Shawn Aaron of the University of Ottawa is leading a five-year CIHR-funded study to find out if clinicians are properly diagnosing asthma, or if they are misdiagnosing patients who have another illness that can mimic the coughing/wheezing condition. "Many patients can have conditions that cause symptoms that can mimic asthma, such as gastro-esophageal reflux (heartburn), or post-viral cough," says Dr. Aaron. "In some cases, patients who have been misdiagnosed with asthma may be chronically using asthma medications which may not be providing benefit."

Research: At research centres from Halifax to Vancouver, more than 600 randomly selected Canadians who have been diagnosed with asthma in the past five years are being weaned off their asthma medications and then tested to see if they truly have the condition or not. "We suspect a lot of doctors are making a diagnosis based on symptoms and aren't following up with confirmatory tests, and we suspect that this may lead to misdiagnosis of some patients," says Dr. Aaron. The findings could eventually lead to more Canadians receiving the proper diagnosis and treatment for respiratory illnesses.

Sources: Statistics Canada. Asthma, by sex, provinces and territories. www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/health50a-eng.htm. Aaron, Shawn D., et al. "Over-diagnosis of asthma in obese and non-obese adults." *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 179, 11 (2008): 1121-31.

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