

Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program at Sinai Health

Supporting innovative care and the well-being of older people across Canada during turbulent times



A REPORT TO
OUR GENEROUS DONORS

FEBRUARY 2021

Thank you for your extraordinary support of Sinai Health during these trying times. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption and changes to the delivery of health care in Canada, but under Dr. Samir Sinha's astute leadership our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program has responded nimbly to ensure that its hospitalized and non-hospitalized patients receive the same attentive care to which they are accustomed.

Responding to the horrifying toll COVID-19 has taken on residents and staff of long-term care (LTC) homes, Dr. Sinha and his team have provided direct assistance to some of the hardest-hit homes. They've led research to understand COVID-19's impacts on residents, families and staff, and have developed guidance on ways to safely provide care and reopen homes to visitors and family caregivers.

This work has been an essential component of Sinai Health's broader pandemic response, which has included studies to strengthen the world's understanding of COVID-19 and efforts to advance diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

With the pandemic's second wave fully upon us, it is comforting to know that your investments in our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program are helping to ensure that Dr. Sinha and his colleagues can continue to deliver care in innovative ways and effectively advocate on behalf of older people and their loved ones.

In this report we are pleased to share more about our program's response to COVID-19 and the impact of initiatives you have directly supported.



“Thank you for your wonderful generosity. With you at our side, our program is making a difference in the lives of older adults at Sinai Health and in communities across Canada.”

– Dr. Samir Sinha

Stepping up in the face of COVID-19

Bolstered by your outstanding support, Dr. Sinha has skillfully piloted our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program through the ongoing turbulence caused by COVID-19. He and his team have rapidly adapted the program's services to ensure continuity of care for our patients, while also aiding older adults and care providers far beyond our walls through a combination of hands-on assistance, research and advocacy.

Going virtual, by necessity

When the Ontario government required hospitals to suspend non-essential in-hospital patient services in mid-March 2020, this meant the ongoing care our geriatrics program provides to more than 1,000 outpatients would have to be delivered virtually, through video conferencing, phone or email.

While we were already leaders in providing virtual care to homebound elders before the pandemic struck, it remained an extremely tall order for Dr. Sinha and his team of geriatricians, geriatric

psychiatrists, nurses, administrators and allied health professionals to take our entire outpatient program virtual. Nevertheless, they rose to the challenge within a matter of weeks.

This involved equipping all of Mount Sinai's geriatrics patient consultation rooms with cameras, speakers and telephones so that our team could care for existing and new patients virtually, and in a setting that maintained their professionalism and patient privacy. Even with our program now open for outpatient visits, over 90% of its patients are still opting to receive their care virtually, as it's far easier for frail older adults and their loved ones to do so from the comfort of their own homes.

Aiding long-term care homes in crisis

As the first wave of COVID-19 came crashing upon Ontario long-term care homes in the spring, taking thousands of residents' lives and causing dangerously low staffing levels, the province called on hospitals to help. Sinai Health teamed up with multiple hard-hit homes in Toronto, giving them expert guidance and direct assistance in the areas of infection prevention and control, occupational health and safety, acute and palliative care.

Sinai Health geriatricians Dr. Nathan Stall and Dr. Barry Goldlist stepped up by caring for residents virtually or in-person and by providing guidance to LTC home staff. With COVID-19's second wave causing an alarming number of deaths in LTC homes, Dr. Sinha and his colleagues stand ready to help again.



Sinai Health geriatrician Dr. Nathan Stall (left) and colleagues prepare to vaccinate LTC home residents, staff and essential caregivers against COVID-19 last month. Sinai Health teams provided first doses of the vaccine to all of our partner LTC and retirement homes by January 13.

Research to support families and policymakers

Throughout the pandemic, Dr. Sinha, Dr. Stall and collaborators have been conducting research and developing tools to assist families with loved ones in LTC homes and to inform the safe reopening of homes to visitors.

For instance, early on in the pandemic Dr. Sinha partnered with researchers in Ottawa and the National Institute on Ageing (NIA), where Dr. Sinha is the director of health policy research, to develop a [decision-making tool](#) that can help families deciding whether to temporarily remove their older relatives from care homes. This tool has been downloaded over 30,000 times and has been highlighted by several media outlets, including CNN.

In June, Dr. Sinha and colleagues from across the country published a [report documenting COVID-19's impact](#) on LTC home residents in Canada. They found that, up to that point in time, LTC home residents represented up to 80% of all COVID-19 deaths in Canada. They also assessed protective measures that had been implemented by homes and made recommendations for improvement.

In analyzing deaths due to COVID-19 in Ontario LTC homes between March 29 and May 20, 2020, Dr. Stall and collaborators [discovered that deaths were twice as likely](#) in highly crowded homes compared to less-crowded homes. Homes with shared bedrooms and bathrooms were associated with larger and deadlier outbreaks of the disease.

In July, Dr. Sinha and Dr. Stall partnered with the NIA to publish an evidence-informed, data-driven [guidance document](#) to support the reopening of Canadian LTC homes to family caregivers and visitors — guidance that was fully implemented by the Ontario and Prince Edward Island governments and was cited by the World Health Organization in its most recent LTC infection prevention and control guidance.

Throughout the pandemic, Dr. Stall and Dr. Sinha have also supported the Public Health Agency of Canada in the development of its official [COVID-19 guidance for LTC homes](#).

More recently, in December, Dr. Stall, Dr. Sinha and several other collaborators published an [overview on COVID-19 and Ontario's LTC homes](#) for the province's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. The overview succinctly details the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic on LTC homes, residents and their families, and recommends several measures to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks, hospitalizations and deaths in the homes.

In the year ahead, Dr. Sinha, Dr. Stall and other NIA members will aid the implementation of best practices — at LTC homes in Toronto and Ottawa — that support the presence of residents' families. The initiative is being funded through a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and has the potential to influence the practices of LTC homes across the country.

Finally, as a testament to Dr. Sinha's and Dr. Stall's expertise and the bold leadership they have demonstrated, Dr. Sinha has just been selected as chair of a committee that will develop comprehensive new national standards for LTC homes throughout Canada, while Dr. Stall has been appointed as the Assistant Scientific Director for Ontario's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table.

Standing up for older Canadians

Never more so than during the pandemic have Canadians needed strong, trusted leadership to advocate on behalf of older adults. One way Dr. Sinha, Dr. Stall and colleagues have done this is by responding to as many media requests as possible, with the aim of keeping the challenges facing older adults — and potential solutions — front and centre in the minds of Canadians and policymakers.

To provide but one example, in an interview with [CBC News](#) last month, Dr. Sinha urged the Ontario government to speed up its schedule for vaccinating older adults who don't live in congregate settings.



Dr. Sinha and Dr. Stall appearing on CBC's The National.

Expert care, from the comfort and convenience of home

Of all the things Fatima is grateful for about the mix of virtual and in-person care that her father, Albino, received in the final months of his life through our Telemedicine Program for Homebound Elders, she says she is most grateful for the precious time it allowed her and her sons to spend with him.

“Without telemedicine, I wouldn’t have been able to keep my father in my home as long as I did,” says Fatima, adding that the care itself was “amazing.”

An avid coin collector, card enthusiast, family man and doting grandfather, Albino began receiving care for his advanced heart failure through our telemedicine program in April 2020 in the midst of the pandemic’s first wave. With heart failure, the heart no longer pumps as well as it should, which can lead to extreme fatigue, shortness of breath and coughing that makes everyday activities like walking very difficult.

During a typical telemedicine appointment, our program’s specialized geriatrics nurse, Nga Truong, would travel to Fatima’s home. Fully decked out in personal protective equipment, Nga would check Albino’s blood pressure and other vitals and ask questions about the 85 year old’s day-to-day health.

She would then start a videoconference with Albino’s Mount Sinai cardiologist, Dr. Jeremy Kobulnik, and together they would review Albino’s health and determine next steps in his care, including any medication adjustments.

“Dr. Kobulnik and Nga really cared for Albino and always made sure to provide the best for him,” says Fatima, adding that Nga’s home visits gave the medical team a better understanding of the family support available to him.

Breaking down barriers

In between home visits, Nga was always just a phone call or email away. Fatima and her sons, Steven and Michael, feel this helped to break down barriers to care associated with more traditional approaches. Challenges that arose between scheduled appointments could be quickly addressed.

“Oftentimes Nga would call me to just check up on my father, and not only to see how he was doing but how I was doing, which meant so much to me,” says Fatima. “Nga was a godsend.”

During a global pandemic that posed a particular risk to her father, Fatima appreciated that telemedicine was safe, convenient and comfortable for Albino, who didn’t have to endure the physical ordeal of getting to Mount Sinai. Research by Dr. Sinha and his team has also found that the program has reduced ER visits and hospitalizations of older heart failure patients.

“Despite never visiting Mount Sinai in person, we never felt more connected to the professionals caring for my father,” says Fatima. “They always made us feel Albino was more than just a patient.”



Our Telemedicine Program for Homebound Elders provided Albino with comprehensive and convenient care.

Advancing the health of older people through education

Educating future and current health professionals, the public, and governments in order to promote and support the health of older adults is one of the critical functions of our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program. Our generous donors play a key role in fuelling this work.

Developing timely educational resources for older people

Materials produced through our Older People's Education and Navigation Strategy (OPENS) have become a trusted resource for older adults, and the general public, across Canada.

Available in multiple languages in print and online at sinaigeriatrics.ca/healtheducation, the materials provide helpful and accurate information that older people can use to make informed decisions and remain as healthy and independent as possible. Developed with direct input from older adults and their caregivers, the booklets are organized under four categories: promoting health and wellness, community support and services, care planning, and diversity and ageing.

Thanks to philanthropy, we are able to continue expanding these resources. We are doing so through a partnership with three organizations: the Retired Teachers of Ontario, the Older Adults Centres' Association of Ontario and the LIFE Institute at Ryerson University. We are working with these community partners to develop and virtually deliver 10 public workshops on healthy ageing that will cover a wide range of topics, including falls prevention, elder abuse, and social isolation.

Through these workshops we will also work directly with older adults to identify up to 10 new topics to be covered by our written resources. Five of these will be COVID-19-related topics that emphasize the need to build and enhance older adults' resilience to stay safe during the pandemic and to transition to the new normal of a post-COVID society.



Continuing education that boosts care nationally

Through our geriatrics continuing education programming, we enhance the ability of health-care professionals across Canada to deliver tailored and effective care to older adults. While COVID-19 has required Dr. Sinha and his team to change the way they deliver this programming, it remains as important as ever.

This includes our annual Geriatrics Institute Education Day, which was held virtually in June 2020, and our annual Geriatrics Update Course held in late October. Both attracted over 1,400 health, social and community care professionals from across Canada, the U.S. and even from as far away as Kenya and Ecuador. In past years when these were solely in-person conferences, we could only host a maximum of 315 learners at a time.

Increasing our capacity to deliver specialized care to older hospitalized patients

In the realm of geriatrics continuing education for Mount Sinai nurses, donor investment enabled our program to hire a Geriatrics Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) last December who will train nurses and other care providers across Mount Sinai.

Geriatrics Clinical Nurse Specialists are particularly skilled at delivering care in ways that maintain the physical and cognitive abilities of older patients, prevent functional decline and promote a healthy recovery. Our new Geriatrics CNS will first focus on ensuring all nurses in Mount Sinai's Ben and Hilda Katz Acute Care for Elders Unit are up-to-date on their geriatrics training. The Geriatrics CNS will then help to enhance care for older hospitalized patients across Mount Sinai by providing geriatrics training to nurses in other inpatient units and supporting quality improvement initiatives in those units.

Supporting older adults through better training for Toronto police officers

A large and growing proportion of incidents reported to the Toronto Police Service (TPS) involve older adults, which may not be surprising given Toronto's ageing population. Police are frequently called upon to check on the well-being of socially isolated elders, to investigate incidents of elder abuse, and to interact with older adults whose dementia is causing them to be physically aggressive or to wander.

What is surprising and alarming is that Toronto police officers are not provided with sufficient training on ageing-related health conditions that can affect older adults' safety during police interactions, nor are they sufficiently familiarized with community resources for vulnerable older adults. The TPS acknowledges this training gap and wants to close it. To that end, in 2016 the TPS established an advisory committee (of which Dr. Sinha is a founding member) to recommend ways that policing in Toronto can become more elder-friendly.

Aided by donor investment, Dr. Sinha and colleagues are partnering with the TPS to develop a training program that seeks to improve the ability of officers to aid older adults who are suffering from dementia or elder abuse, or who may be socially isolated.

Last summer our geriatrics program hired a University of Toronto medical student to assist Dr. Sinha in researching what other police forces may already be doing in this regard, so as to learn from their experiences while at the same time developing a training program that reflects the needs of people in Toronto. The curriculum for the three-hour training program is now under development.

The training will include in-person, experiential components that give police officers a tangible sense of how ageing-related health issues can impact elders. For this and other reasons, Toronto police will begin receiving the training once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.



Creating training opportunities in home-based primary care

SPRINT Senior Care's House Calls Program, delivered in partnership with Sinai Health and others, brings primary and specialized medical care right into the houses of homebound elders. Sinai Health geriatricians, geriatric psychiatrists and other specialists offer their services as part of the comprehensive House Calls team so that patients can live independently as long as possible.



More training opportunities in home-based primary care, for doctors and nurses, are needed to attract additional care providers into this field and nurture its growth. Thanks to donor investment, in the last year we have been able to move toward meeting this need by working to establish Canada's first home-based primary care fellowship program.

The House Calls Fellowship Program will offer up to 10 fellowship positions over the next four years to post-graduate doctors and nurses. Our donor-supported education coordinator has begun to lay the groundwork for the program by detailing eligibility criteria for the fellows, as well as application and evaluation processes. She will also aid the development of the fellowship curriculum.

Helping older adults struggling with mental illness

As many as 30% of Ontario elders suffer from depression, anxiety or other mental health problems. This harms their quality of life and in the worst cases can lead to suicide. It also impacts their loved ones, affects hospital usage and tears at our social fabric.

To address this critical issue, our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program recently partnered with two organizations to begin providing community and home-based care to older adults living with severe and persistent mental illness and age-related health conditions.

The initiative is led by Reconnect Community Health Services, with Sinai Health offering the support of geriatricians and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health contributing geriatric psychiatry support. The multidisciplinary team, which also includes nurses, behavioural therapists and occupational therapists, provides a range of intensive treatment, support and follow-up services to improve patients' quality of life and help them avoid hospitalization.



Taking our geriatrics program to new heights

Since Mount Sinai became the first academic health sciences centre in Canada to make geriatric medicine a core strategic priority 10 years ago, our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program has become renowned for delivering the right level of care, at the right time and in the right place to help frail, older patients avoid hospitalization or return to independence at home.

Under Dr. Sinha's leadership, our Acute Care for Elders Strategy has transformed the way we care for older adults. It has been cited by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and other leading international organizations as a world exemplar.

With investment from our incredible donor community, in the years ahead our goal is to expand and secure our research and medical education mission, as well as revamp our outpatient care facilities. We will do this by:

- **Fully endowing our Sinai 100 Dr. Barry J. Goldlist Chair in Ageing and Health** – Thanks to the generosity of many, we have already raised \$720,000 of the minimum \$3 million required to fully endow the Dr. Goldlist Chair. Once established, the chair will support dynamic clinician-researchers who will lead studies to spearhead advancements in care that will ultimately enhance the health of Canada's rapidly ageing population.
- **Endowing the world's first Chair in Geriatric Medicine Education** – Canada has a shortage of skilled health professionals with expertise in caring for older adults. There are, for instance, nine times as many pediatricians than geriatricians in Canada, despite the fact that there are more seniors than children under 15 in the country. This chair will promote and support the education of geriatrics-focused health professionals by attracting and retaining international leaders in geriatric medicine education.
- **Endowing Sinai Health-based International Fellowships in Geriatric Medicine** – Another way to help meet the unmet demand for geriatricians in Canada is by establishing geriatric medicine fellowships at Sinai Health that attract early-career doctors from outside of Canada. These one-year fellowships will enable them to complete their geriatric medicine training at Sinai Health and then allow them to practise in Canada or further build leading geriatric services in their home countries.
- **Building a state-of-the-art clinical space for older patients** – Mount Sinai supports 381,000 outpatient visits annually, many of whom are older adults. To provide them with the best care experience, later this year we will begin to build a new space where they will have convenient, one-stop access for lab tests, appointments with doctors and follow-ups. This will especially enhance the experiences and health of people with limited mobility or cognitive impairment.



Our Sinai 100 Dr. Barry J. Goldlist Chair in Ageing and Health will honour a true pioneer in geriatric medicine and fuel practice-changing research.





Looking back on the tumultuous and challenging year we have all experienced, we are especially grateful for your exceptional philanthropy. It is enabling our Healthy Ageing and Geriatrics Program to advance health care so that more elders can live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives as independently as possible. Thank you for your ongoing support.

For more information, please contact:

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what
care
can
do.