

SUMMARY REPORT

Walk in My Shoes: Do Cities Work for Older Adults?



INTRODUCTION

Researchers at the Centre for Hip Health and Mobility (CHHM), Vancouver Coastal Health, the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Simon Fraser University (SFU) are investigating how the physical and social environments impact the mobility, social connectedness, independence and ultimately the health of older adults. An overarching aim of the research is to enhance the age supportive capacity of urban spaces and to promote and prolong active, independent living for the aging demographic. CHHM researchers are internationally recognized experts in mobility, physical activity and health research. They have received funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Peter Wall Solutions Initiative and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research to fund two innovative research teams - *Walk the Talk (WTT)* and *Active Streets, Active People (ASAP)*.

On May 9th, the WTT and ASAP teams hosted a neighborhood walking tour called *Walk in My Shoes* in celebration of the World Health Organization's World Health Day. This year the theme of the day was *good health adds life to years*. "Making cities more age supportive will certainly 'add life to years' and improve older adults' quality of life," stated Atiya Mahmood, co-investigator on the ASAP team and Assistant Professor in the Department of Gerontology at SFU. Current evidence shows that neighbourhood environments become increasingly influential on older adults physical activity and social behaviour as they age. Neighbourhood features, such as proximity to amenities and services and the presences of benches, sidewalks and parks, for example, are being studied in relation to older adult activity choices, travel behaviour and social connectedness. There is a link between physical activities (e.g. walking) and prevention or delayed/decreased effects of many chronic diseases (e.g., heart disease, diabetes) that commonly affect individuals in later life. Furthermore, there are links between increased mobility in older adults and increased independence and improved psychological, emotional and social well-being.



The overall purpose of the *Walk in My Shoes* event was to raise awareness about the interaction between older adult health, mobility and the physical and social environments. This is a core focus for both the WTT and ASAP research teams. An additional motivation for the event was to facilitate dialogue and interactions between community-dwelling older adults, key stakeholders, service providers, community groups and urban planners and engineers. The event was formatted to be active and interactive and included presentations from numerous community partners and leaders, a walking tour of Vancouver's West End neighbourhood and a debriefing group discussion.

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the *Walk in My Shoes* event and highlight key points from the discussions among a diverse group of participants - especially the statements made by the older adults who participated. These discussions were focused around the connection between mobility, social connectedness and neighbourhood environment. Findings outline in the report will be used to refine and guide the research directions of the WTT and ASAP teams. Additionally, the WTT and ASAP teams will share the report with various local, national and international stakeholders to raise awareness about impact of the physical and social environments on the mobility, health and social well-being of community dwelling older adults.

PRESENTATIONS

Dr. Joanie Sims-Gould, a lead investigator on both the WTT and ASAP teams, provided the opening welcome. She underscored the importance of community engagement in the research process: “people know what they need in their neighbourhoods and what works - the key is tapping into this knowledge and ensuring that it is heard, shared and communicated to researchers, decision makers and community members.” Joanie introduced the invited speakers, each of whom brought a different perspective to the topic of healthy aging.

Gordon Harris, President and CEO, SFU Community Trust, has worked with the Canadian Urban Institute for much of the last decade to research and analyze the planning implications of a rapidly aging population in Canadian communities. Setting the context for the event, Gordon provided statistics demonstrating the changing population profile in Canada and described the current built environment across the country as “unsustainable” as our population ages. He spoke about the necessity of designing and building communities where people can age safely and conveniently, reasoning that safe, walkable neighbourhoods with easy access to services allow people to live longer in their own communities. He noted that “low-friction” communities with limited physical obstacles work better not only for older people, but in fact for everyone.

“People know what they need in their neighbourhoods and what works – the key is tapping into this knowledge and ensuring that it is heard, shared and communicated...”

Frank McCormick, Board of Directors Member for the West End Seniors’ Network (WESN), offered his perspective on the role of community organizations and seniors’ centers in creating age-supportive neighbourhoods. He spoke of the many programs that are offered by WESN to support older adult health and mobility, including walking companion, shopping, and thrift shop programs. In his description these programs it became evident that community design plays a critical role in the kinds of programs that can be offered as well as their accessibility to older adult.

Two representatives from the City of Vancouver spoke about upcoming activities planned for the West End. **Holly Sovdi**, an Urban Planner with Central Area Planning, is leading the new West End Community Plan. He described how the West End has grown and changed in the last decade. The new community plan will address the current needs as well as the future growth and evolution of the West End - helping the City support the neighbourhood in a meaningful way. “The new plan will address broader city and regional objectives while still recognizing the specific community values that make the area unique,” he stated. The Plan will provide long- and short-term direction on a variety of topics, including land use, urban design, housing, transportation, local business, parks and public spaces, heritage features and community facilities. Holly underscored that community events, like the walking tour, help highlight the specific interests and needs of different groups within the neighbourhood.

Dale Bracewell, Active Transportation Manager in the Department of Engineering, described how Active Transportation initiatives fit within Vancouver’s Transportation 2040 Plan, which will direct the City’s transportation decisions for the years ahead. He spoke to the efforts being made by his team to create safer and more comfortable transportation corridors that will also support social interactions, community events and the mobility of all residents and visitors of Vancouver using various modes (foot, bike, transit and automobile). To achieve the visions of the Active Transportation department, a higher design standard is required, one that integrates various sectors and departments and one that considers people of all ages and individual needs.

FINDINGS

After the presentations, participants divided into small groups and set out to ‘assess’ a segment of Vancouver’s West End neighbourhood using a specially designed checklist developed by the WTT and ASAP research teams. The checklist guided users to identify features of the neighbourhood that either supported or inhibited older adult mobility and consequently their ability to lead physically active, socially engaged and healthy lives within the neighbourhood. The seven sections of the checklist are listed below, along with a summary of the key finding and statements from older adult participants.



Parks & Mini-Parks

- Washrooms and fountains are needed to make parks and mini-parks more usable by people of all ages.
- Mini-parks should provide opportunities for intergenerational interaction. For example, seating areas for older adults that are close to parks and playgrounds.
- There should be ample seating space and benches should be kept clean.

Street Crossings & Way Finding

- Pedestrian operated traffic lights are helpful for older adults.
- Curb cuts and ramps need to be wide and need to direct the user to where they want to go - across the street - not into the middle of the street.
- Maps and signage at main intersections will help with orientation and can encourage people to use certain corridors and features along the routes (i.e. services, parks).
- To make them easier to see, street signs need larger sized font, need to be reflective, need appropriate colour contrasts and foliage needs to be maintained so as to not block the visibility of the sign.

Sidewalks

- Wide sidewalks ensure that pedestrian traffic in both directions have ample space.
- Trees are great for providing shade and greenery, but roots budging up from sidewalks can become trip hazards.
- Overgrowth of bushes and trees can cause visibility problems on sidewalks and can become obstacles if they extend over the walk way.
- Sidewalks need to be smooth and even.



“Most mini-parks used to be a streetway and they still ‘feel’ like a street. Effort should be made to make mini-parks more park-like and to divide pedestrians and park users from traversing bike traffic.”

Traffic

- Fast moving traffic makes people feel unsafe - traffic calming required.
- Automobile traffic in all residential areas should be slowed down to 30 km/hour, not just select streets.

Personal Safety

- More lighting is required on roadways as well as on sidewalks.
- The creation of designated areas for older adults, or ‘age-friendly zones’ would increase the sense of safety.
- A neighbourhood watch program, more police patrolling or a team of volunteer security guards would make neighbourhoods feel safer and would encourage older adults to get out more, especially in the evening.

“When there are lots of other people around, places feel safe.”

Pleasant and Supportive Routes

- More benches are required on hilly routes to make them accessible to older adults.
- Aesthetically pleasing landscaping and flowers make places pleasant to be in and walk through.
- Having amenities located within the neighbourhood encourage people to get out, to walk and to socialize.

“I like having elements of nature throughout the neighbourhood – greenery, flowers and birds chirping encourage me to get out into the community.”

Social Connectedness

- Neighbourhoods need destinations that provide opportunities for social interaction, such as shops, churches, libraries and community centres.
- A diversity of destinations, services and amenities not only make places functional, but also make places more interesting - encouraging people to get out and use their neighbourhood more.
- Too much density can become problematic. Too much development and too many people can make for inhospitable places to walk and be social.



“I meet with friends in the neighbourhood every day. I love the setbacks from the streets and gardens that make these social outings possible. I choose to live in this neighbourhood because it is friendly. I like knowing people in my neighbourhood and saying hello to people I see on the street.”

CONCLUSIONS

The feedback at the event identified key features of the physical and social environment that help and hinder the mobility, physical activity and social interaction of older adults, aspects which have a clear impact on health. Throughout the event, it became apparent that there is an important need to engage various age groups in the design and appraisal of their neighbourhood and how it meets their needs and expectations. Further, the event underscored the important role of community participation in the research process.

Information gathered from the event will be directed to various stakeholder groups to assist communities in planning for the aging demographic.

“Engaging community groups in the research process provides an authentic evidence base from which to start planning, make decisions and create neighbourhoods that support healthy aging.”

MEDIA COVERAGE

The Walk In My Shoes neighbourhood tour attracted quite a bit of media attention. Below are links to the various locations where it was featured.

- [The Early Edition](#): Interview with Dr. Joanie Sims-Gould on May 9th at 8:20 am.
- [The Province](#): Vancouver walk points towards better urban planning
- [Shanghai Daily](#): Canada looks to make streets safer for seniors
- [CBC Radio-Canada](#) (French): Towards a better understanding of the needs of elderly pedestrians in Vancouver's West End
- [VCHRI News](#), Walk in My Shoes: Do cities work for older adults?
- AM 1150 Radio Kelowna: Interview with Dr. Meghan Winters on May 10th. Unfortunately, links of past shows are not available.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about the *Walk the Talk* or *Active Street*, *Active People* research, or the *Walk in My Shoes* event please contact:

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ASAP
active streets // active people

WalkTheTalk

The Centre for Hip Health and Mobility, located at the Vancouver General Hospital, conducts innovative research programs to decrease the burden of falls, fracture and arthritis across B.C., Canada, and the world. It is the first international research centre to broadly focus on problems affecting the human hip across the lifespan by integrating researchers in various aspects of bone health, falls prevention, and arthritis. The Centre is a partnership of UBC Faculty of Medicine and Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute. www.hiphealth.ca

The Walk the Talk Research Team is taking an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the interaction between older adult health and mobility with the built and social environments. Ultimately, the team's results will link the walkability and accessibility of communities to older adults' mobility and ultimately, to their ability to live independently within their own communities. Funded by a 5 year, \$1.5 million dollar grant from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, the team is undertaking a number of research projects, including a community based cross-sectional study, literature reviews and street audits.

The Active Streets, Active People (ASAP) Research Team is a multidisciplinary team of researchers from the Centre for Hip Health and Mobility, UBC the Faculty of Health Sciences and Department of Gerontology, Simon Fraser University (SFU), whose expertise span the social to applied sciences. ASAP, is an innovative research project funded by the Peter Wall Solutions Initiative (PWSI) and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR). It will capitalize on a "natural experiment" in the downtown core by the City of Vancouver, which is adapting and redesigning the streetscape along stretches of Comox and Helmcken Street as part of its citywide greenways plan. Employing a spectrum of research methods, the ASAP team will evaluate the influence of street-level changes on older adult's mobility and social interactions to gain an understanding about their well-being and quality of life. Specifically, they will investigate whether travel patterns, street usage, and social opportunities are enhanced after development of the Greenway.

Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute is the research body of Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, which includes BC's largest academic and teaching health sciences centres: Vancouver General Hospital, UBC Hospital, and GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre. The institute is academically affiliated with UBC Faculty of Medicine, and is one of Canada's top funded research centres, with \$82.4 million in research funding for 2009/2010. www.vchri.ca.

The University of British Columbia (UBC) is one of North America's largest public research and teaching institutions, and one of only two Canadian institutions consistently ranked among the world's 40 best universities. Surrounded by the beauty of the Canadian West, it is a place that inspires bold, new ways of thinking that have helped make it a national leader in areas as diverse as community service learning, sustainability and research commercialization. UBC offers more than 55,000 students a range of innovative programs and attracts \$550 million per year in research funding from government, non-profit organizations and industry through 7,000 grants.

Simon Fraser University (SFU) is one of Canada's top three comprehensive universities (for almost 20 years). SFU is a student-centred, research-driven, community-engaged university— committed to enhancing the well-being of current and future generations through teaching excellence, innovative research, and partnerships within our communities. SFU trains over 30,000 students at three campuses across Metro Vancouver.