

Cheryl Regehr, PhD

By Philip Candilis, MD



The inspiration for public service was critical for the Provost of the University of Toronto, a long-time friend to the American Academy

of Psychiatry and the Law. Winner of AAPL's 2004 Amicus Award, Professor Cheryl Regehr grew up in a family that served as a haven for foster children with special needs – children who benefited enormously from the teaching and social work backgrounds of her parents. Now a social work scholar and educator herself, Dr. Regehr has made a career of forensic mental health and fosters a university environment that nurtures students focused on community and societal needs.

Trained in emergency and forensic mental health, Dr. Regehr studied both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence – writing her doctoral dissertation on factors that contributed to the resilience of rape survivors. Early attachment, quality of relationships, and cognitive orientation all mattered to those recovering from sexual assault.

Moreover it was the structure offered by the community that contributed to a better outcome. Support systems, counseling, and educational efforts joined personal factors to influence the choices available to survivors and underscore the importance of systemic solutions to broad concerns like sexual violence.

In student health for example, Provost Regehr advocates preventive education on sexual violence, robust mental health services, supports for those harmed, and procedural fairness for the accused – a systems-based process that values individual and community integration.

Traceable to her work in emergency management, Dr. Regehr draws on her leadership of the clinical team at Toronto's Pearson Airport, where most APA members recently landed

for their annual meetings. Planning for all aspects of an airport emergency allowed for a comprehensive view of problems that might arise for her as chief executive officer of a major university.

Studying trauma in emergency service workers was a related element of her work, as Cheryl explored the factors influencing recovery from the stresses of public safety. What effects does exposure have among those responding to emergencies, and is there a related effect on public safety? It is not inconceivable that PTSD and related symptoms will have an impact on decision-making in a crisis. In work presented over the past two years at AAPL, Dr. Regehr identified influences of clinicians' PTSD on suicide risk assessments as well as among police officers and paramedics.

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Dr. Regehr's contributions to AAPL are long-standing. First presenting in 1988, Cheryl appears regularly to present results or participate on panels. Her work has appeared on eight separate occasions in the AAPL Journal. AAPL's strength is that it lies in the frequent start of important ideas in the clinical realm that then develop into research that is itself applicable to clinical practice, she says: “There are few organizations that exhibit that connection between research and practice.”

One project that stands out in Dr. Regehr's work is a collaborative project with current AAPL President Graham Glancy, analyzing Battered Woman's Syndrome (BWS) defendants who had killed their partners. Their analysis of the elements of the defense required by the Canadian Criminal Code led to a better understanding of the factors distinguishing BWS cases from others. The prolonged nature of intimate partner vio-

lence and the fatalistic sense that there was no way out emerged as a critical part of the mind-set of defendants who felt they would die if they did not protect themselves with deadly force.

Whether leading a social work research center, a sexual assault center, or a major international university, Professor Regehr has found the multiple perspectives of forensic work instructive in analyzing complex social and communitarian issues. “It's easy to hold a singular theoretical and political view,” she says. The challenge lies in seeing complex human behavior from the perspective of many constituents and stakeholders. AAPL Amicus Cheryl Regehr does exactly that. ☪

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