



The Brain Builders Lab was a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Its aim was to move Brain Story science, which links childhood trauma to later health outcomes, into action. Between 2019 and 2021, participants in the Brain Builders Lab undertook projects to spread and embed Brain Story science in their communities. This case study along with the others in the series provides practical advice on how to develop and implement projects, along with project impacts and lessons learned.

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team (all from Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit)

- Claudia Swoboda-Geen, Public Health Nurse, Substance Use and Injury Prevention Program; Co-chair, Prevention Pillar, Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy
- Mia Brown, Manager, Substance Use and Injury Prevention Program
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- Cathy Eisener, Public Health Nurse
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Location

- Simcoe Muskoka Region, Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

Substance use is a key concern in Simcoe Muskoka. The opioid overdose emergency has taken a significant toll in many communities in the region and there is increasing interest across the continuum of care in finding new ways to address this complex issue. However, the stigma around substance use is still a significant problem, and most prevention efforts to date have not focused on the root causes of substance use and addiction.

The goals of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) team were:

- To communicate Brain Story science to a broad audience to increase understanding of addiction and its root causes, and to reduce stigma;
- To align diverse players in substance use prevention, intervention and treatment around a common knowledge base that could help guide collective work; and
- To build knowledge and skills in relevant professions to generate new ideas that could better address the root causes of addiction and ultimately improve outcomes in the region.



Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Initial and broad awareness-raising: In May 2019, the team partnered with the Palix Foundation to host a full-day workshop to launch their project. The workshop included scientific presentations, the Brain Architecture Game and group discussions. The intent was to build awareness of how the Brain Story relates to substance use, addiction and mental health outcomes. Workshop invitations were distributed through the team’s networks, including the network for the region’s drug strategy, and stakeholders were encouraged to invite their own contacts. The resulting interest among a broad cross-section of attendees was so significant that capacity had to be expanded from 100 to 250 and there was still a waiting list. One notable immediate outcome was that the mayor of Orillia, who had attended the workshop, reached out to explore what Orillia could do to support the work.

Targeted awareness-raising: Following the workshop, the team developed and delivered presentations on core Brain Story concepts and their relevance, for example, to the overdose emergency, to several key groups in the region. The presentations promoted the Brain Story Certification Course (BSCC) and other Alberta Family Wellness Initiative resources as tools to help build awareness and understanding among different professions and sectors, including nurses and home visitors within SMDHU, emergency medical services workers, law enforcement, and municipal and regional government.

Onboarding new partners: In another post-workshop development, Georgian College became a significant project partner. Jennifer Lloyd is the manager of the Mental Health Strategy at the college and co-chair with Claudia of the Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy’s Prevention Pillar. She began delivering lunch and learn sessions for faculty members to promote the BSCC as a staff development and teaching tool, and to share scientific concepts and discuss how they could be used to promote health, wellbeing and resilience in both faculty and students. One outcome is that staff are now developing an online learning module on stress for all students at Georgian College.

Outcomes and Impact

Emergence of new champions: The team’s strategy of building broad, cross-sectoral awareness paid off. Their “push” for awareness quickly became a “pull” from many individuals and groups requesting more information. Some of this interest was unexpected, coming as it did from “unusual suspects” such as people from the law enforcement and insurance sectors. A number of additional champions have emerged from the team’s early awareness-raising efforts and are now helping to support change in their own settings.

Organizational change: Within SMDHU, the BSCC is now mandatory training for staff in the Substance Use and Injury Prevention Program and the Family Home Visitation Program. Other teams, including those for chronic disease prevention and school health, are also encouraging their staff to explore the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative resources and enroll in the BSCC. Brain Story concepts have also been integrated into SMDHU’s Mental Health Promotion Strategy Report.

Key presentations

- Joint meeting of the Collingwood Ontario Provincial Police Services Board and Town of the Blue Mountains
- Public safety meeting at the Tay Township Council Chambers sponsored by the Tay Township Volunteer Community Policing Committee
- Nottawasaga Police Services Board
- Midland’s Safe and Sober Awareness Committee
- Town of Collingwood’s executive director of Customer and Corporate Service
- Simcoe County’s senior management team
- Information booth at Orillia opioid forum



Policy change: Simcoe County has formally requested that all municipalities within its boundaries consider promoting the BSCC to their staff. The City of Barrie has included information on the Brain Story in their staff resources and is exploring opportunities to further promote the concepts. This regional and municipal government support will help expand awareness of Brain Story science, and lays the groundwork for the future alignment of government policies across business units.

Shifting mental models: Within the community, understanding about the root causes of addiction and other social issues is starting to shift, allowing people to think differently about how to address these issues. For example, one rural community that until recently had adhered to traditional views of substance use prevention is now open to more upstream efforts based on Brain Story science.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Be inclusive: everyone has a role in tackling complex social issues. The team's launch event in 2019 helped spark interest in the Brain Story among a broad range of individuals across sectors. The diversity of participants, from direct service providers to senior government leaders, meant that there was an opportunity for rich dialogue from multiple viewpoints about the relevance of the knowledge and how to use it across sectors to support improved substance use prevention, intervention and treatment.

Target leadership early and align the work with their goals. Brain Story science aligned well with much of the work that was already underway in the region. By pitching it as a foundational knowledge base that could add value especially to prevention work, the team was able to quickly get leadership buy-in and support within SMDHU, law enforcement, and regional and municipal governments. Many of the interested individuals hold influential positions in the community. They are not only decision makers, but also have the power to drive their staff and related community initiatives in directions that can either align with evidence or with ideology. With these additional champions in place, the work has an excellent chance of achieving sustainability.

Be nimble and opportunistic. The size and strength of the team provided access to multiple relationships and networks they could tap to share the knowledge widely. However, the team also anticipated there would be varying degrees of readiness for engagement in the work. If there was traction in a particular sector, they capitalized on and pursued it. If they hit a roadblock with a particular individual or group, they re-strategized and moved on.

The opioid overdose emergency has taken a significant toll in Simcoe Muskoka. However, this has created more openness to new ideas and new thinking about how to approach this complex and challenging issue. The team remains committed to spreading Brain Story science within the community and using it as a platform to reduce the stigma around substance use and spur deeper conversations about prevention. They are currently working within SMDHU and its community and school board partners to explore how to implement the Brain Story in practice.

Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Regional Strategies for ACEs Awareness and Professional Training](#)



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