



Former Ottawa dean receives gender equity award

Dr. John Seely received the first-ever May Cohen Gender Equity Award from the Council of Ontario Faculties of Medicine (COFM) in mid-September. The former dean of medicine at the University of Ottawa set a number of precedents in faculty-related gender equity beginning in 1993, when he appointed Dr. Yvonne Lefebvre as Canada's first assistant dean, gender issues. "He made gender equity important in the faculty," says Lefebvre, now vice-dean, research, and vice-president, academic and research, at the Ottawa Hospital.

Seely also helped establish the university's Office of Gender and Equity Issues in 1997 under the direction of Dr. Rose Goldstein. "My role was very small," Seely said when he accepted the unique knit-picture award. "It is an important step to recognize gender issues in this way."

Over the years, the office's initiatives have resulted in what is arguably the most progressive program at a Canadian medical school. The office's initiatives include a sexual harassment policy, mentoring, flexible part-time work arrangements, proportional representation on all faculty committees, an informal conflict-resolution system and parental leave. In addition, each of the 14 departments has established its own gender equity committee. An advisory committee with 30 members, including the departmental representatives, helps guide the office's policies. In making the presentation, Dr. Barbara Lent, chair of COFM's Gender Issues Committee, also announced that the award would be named in honour of Dr. May Cohen, a longtime gender equity advocate and past chair of the CMA's Gender Equity Committee. Cohen helped establish the



Dr. John Seely accepts gender equity award from Dr. Barbara Lent as Dr. Yvonne Lefebvre looks on

COFM committee and "has been involved in almost every project in Ontario and across Canada in the last 10 or 15 years," said Lent. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Research Update

Finding the gene that regulates HDL cholesterol

A breakthrough in genetic research may eventually help significant numbers of people with cardiovascular disease. Canadian researchers have discovered that mutations in a single gene — *ABCI* — are responsible for familial high-density lipoprotein (HDL) deficiency and the rare Tangier disease (*Nat Genet* 1999;22:336-45). This research could lead to drug treatments to increase HDL-C levels in the half of all patients with coronary artery disease who have decreased amounts of HDL-C. Contrary to popular belief, low levels of "good" cholesterol, HDL-C, and not high levels of "bad" cholesterol, low-density-lipoprotein (LDL)-C, are the most common abnormality in patients with cardiac disease.

"Our new findings put Canada in the lead in the race to find new ways of increasing HDL-C levels and eventually to develop treatments that will help prevent coronary artery disease," said Dr. Michael Hayden, scientific director of the Centre for Molecular Medicine and Therapeutics in Vancouver, who led the study. Xenon Bioresearch Inc., a Vancouver biotechnology company, also collaborated in the research study.

The scientists studied families from Quebec and The Netherlands with early-onset, severe heart disease. The gene mutations were discovered through cholesterol and DNA measurements from blood samples. Faulty *ABCI* genes are linked to defects in cholesterol transfer from

body tissue to HDL molecules that normally transport cholesterol to the liver. The researchers now hope to investigate the reasons that this transport fails and to develop compounds to bring HDL-C levels to normal.

"The gene provides us with a doorway into understanding the entire pathway," said Frank Holler, president of Xenon Bioresearch. "This discovery is a significant breakthrough, which we hope to incorporate very quickly into developing novel treatments for cardiovascular disease." The search for potential treatments has already begun, with thousands of compounds being screened to see which ones are effective in elevating HDL-C gene levels. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*