McMaster Program for Faculty Development (MacPFD)

Spark Podcast

Official Transcript

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Producer: Nick Hoskin
Music by: Scott Holmes
Featured Guest: Dr. Catherine Munn
Interviewer: Dr. Teresa Chan
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Ruth Chen (00:02):

Welcome to the MacPFD Spark podcast. This is Ruth Chen and in the Sparkle sub series, we'll bring you shorter segments released in between our longer Spark episodes. We'll have new and exciting interviews with professionals from across the world, helping you to achieve your personal and professional goals as a healthcare educator, researcher, leader, or practitioner at any stage of your career. So, sit back, listen, and enjoy this episode of the MacPFD Spark podcast.

In this segment, Catherine Munn shares about her ground in psychiatry, her focus on student mental health and wellness, the Okanagan Charter, and her important contributions to the McMaster Okanagan Committee.

Dr. Teresa Chan (00:55):

Hello everyone. I'm here with Dr. Catherine Munn and she is a woman of many hats, but in one particular hat that she likes to wear sometimes is that she's been put in charge of this Okanagan Mental Health Task Force and I brought her here to talk to us a little bit about what that is, it's origin story, and then where it's all headed. So, Catherine, can you say hi to everyone?

Dr. Catherine Munn (01:18):

Hello everyone and thanks for having me, Teresa.

Dr. Teresa Chan (01:20):

All right. So can you, you give yourself an introduction to the crew that might not know you and tell us a little bit about just who you are as a person.

Dr. Catherine Munn (01:29):

Sure. So I've been a McMaster for a very, very long time it seems. I came here after my undergraduate as a medical student at Mac, and then stayed on and finished my psychiatry residency here. And then on graduation, I essentially moved on to stay in Hamilton and at McMaster working in emergency initially, and then moving into a student mental health. And then I've worked as a psychiatrist in the student mental health arena at the student wellness at McMaster for many,

many years. And then moving more into sort of policy and research around student mental health than substance use up until about a year and a half ago or a year ago.

And then in the pandemic, I moved into a new position within the post-graduate medical education area, and I've become the assistant Dean of Resident Affairs. And so in that job, I am helping residents navigate the journey through residency from kind of a personal, professional, academic side, and really, really happy to be working closely with residents and program directors and faculty in that position.

Dr. Teresa Chan (02:26):

All right. So you spend your life's work really focusing in on mental health and how it intersects with everything that we do. And so I thank you for that because that's not an easy job. Can you tell me a little bit about what your take is in terms of things that people should pay attention to when they're looking to help, advance the cause of raising awareness and supporting those who are going through any struggles?

Dr. Catherine Munn (02:50):

I guess I would frame it in two ways. I think first of all, it's important, obviously we all have a state of mental health just as we all have a state of health. And I think everyone's increasingly aware of that. And I think the pandemic has made us really increasingly aware of our mental health and maybe some of the things that can really get in the way such as social isolation, quarantine, things like that. I think a lot more of us are aware of what happens when we can't or have difficulties taking care of our mental health, but also what it's like to develop kind of a mental health problem or a mental illness or substance use problem. So, I think that's one big part of the conversation, but I think that's only part of it. So, I think the other piece is we all find ourselves in many environments.

We all live in a family probably or in a household. We live in communities. We work in different places and we study in different schools and we also live in a big world that has lots of communities in it as well. And so I think increasingly we're recognizing just the profound influence that the communities around us and their cultures and their ways of doing business have effects on our mental health. And I think for many in health sciences, this would mean the effect of the university and the way it does business and the effects of the hospitals and how it does its work and the effects that that can have on us as individuals trying to practice medicine or be a practitioner of another kind as well as the patients within those systems.

Dr. Teresa Chan (04:20):

All right. And so obviously for the faculty health sciences crew that might be listening to this, that resonates for sure, right? Like there are many things that we need to do to bridge from what we do in our clinical lives and into more academic zones, but some of our listeners might identify more as being a researcher or other folks. And so, I think that the work that you've been doing with the Okanagan initiative really is linked to kind of raising capacity across all of our faculty at McMaster. Is that correct?

Dr. Catherine Munn (04:48):

Yes, absolutely. So the work of the Okanagan Mental Health Task Force is really under the Okanagan Charter Office, which the whole idea of the Okanagan Charter Office is really to look at the health and well being of our campus and everyone that's on our campus, meaning faculty, staff, and

students from every area, including FHS, but all of our other faculties as well. And all the staff and students that study and work at McMaster. It has a sort of broad mandate. And so I do think there are specific things that concern faculty, health sciences, but I think the issues of mental health, and I think that sort of second category, which is more around psychological health and safety. So meaning what is it about our environment, how healthy and safe in a psychological sense, not just a physical sense are schools and hospitals and other environments, but especially in this case, our school.

Dr. Teresa Chan (05:45):

And I think that this is part of a much bigger social movement to really kind of bring awareness that mental health really is health in general. And so if you want to have a vibrant, active community, it's important to bring in an understanding and awareness of how we can support each other when times get tough, but also when times are doing okay. I mean, like there's lots of chatter I guess lately on the internet about this idea of maybe you're not thriving, maybe you're not really having trouble per se, but maybe you're just kind of like, blah, maybe you're just not feeling it lately. And I think that those kind of feelings that we have, there are things that we need to tap into in order to be our best selves, right. And being able to understand that and help work through.

Dr. Catherine Munn (06:28):

Absolutely. And I think we are moving in a different place as a society and recognizing mental health is on a continuum and we all have a state of our mental health at one given point in time. And that can change pretty profoundly to another time in our lives. And I think with the pandemic, we really recognize perhaps more so and are more tuned into ourselves and the responses we're having. I think to your point around, we are really having conversations that include the language about people languishing or people flourishing. And those interesting are conversations we've been having in the student mental health arena for a very long time, but now I just see them moving out into the mainstream, talking about where people are at, and it's not necessarily a conversation just focused on mental health problems or mental illness, which is also an incredibly important topic, but in a way it's a different conversation.

There's the mental health conversation, but there's also an important conversation to be had about mental health disorders, substance use disorders and mental illness. Those are very real conditions that also we need to attend to. They're kind of intersecting, but sometimes different conversations.

Dr. Teresa Chan (07:32):

Fair enough. And I think that just like anything else, like you might need someone who's a physiotherapist when you've hurt yourself, but you may need a different person that helps you go to the gym every week as a personal trainer, right. And if you're looking to go beyond and actually become an elite athlete, again may be a different skillset. So each one of these states that we're in, you may need formal counseling therapists, psychologists, psychiatrist sometimes, but sometimes you just need a peer mentor, a person, and to talk, to have more understanding colleagues that can support you when you're in that middle stage. And then if you're looking to really be excelling again, there might be a role for people who want to get executive coaching or other things like that. And we're going to be hopefully intersecting with some people that have that mandate as well, going forward to really kind of shed the light on how we can bring some coaching principles into what we do. But I see it as a continuum as well, right?

Like you may need different things for different people at different parts of their lives. And at the end of the day, if we can create that network of support to grow people, that's really what it's all about.

Dr. Catherine Munn (08:34):

Something I spend a lot of time talking about is the idea of mental health literacy. And what really that means is how literate, how familiar are we with these kinds of concepts and having these conversations and perhaps the resources that are available and when we might need certain resources and when we might need others. And it's really, as you know, from working in hospitals and such sometimes it is the emergency room that we need for a mental health situation, but that's rarely the right answer. I mean, we have to start way, way earlier than that and attend to issues of our mental health and attend to when we're getting into difficulties and kind of the earlier we recognize and work on our mental health and address kind of symptoms and concerns early, the less likely it's going to be that we're going to land in a crisis situation.

Dr. Teresa Chan (09:22):

Yeah. I think it's about prevention, acknowledgement getting help early. It's the same things that we want to do when we have a student who might need extra help rather than waiting until the end of term. And having things fall all apart with someone failing an exam or similarly just with their health, right? Like making sure that you're staying on top of other general medical health, such as like quitting smoking, eating better, exercising every day. All of that can have payoffs to prevent like a big heart attack or a stroke or things like that. I think the analogies are abound and hopefully that resonates with everyone who's listening from our faculty and beyond.

Dr. Catherine Munn (09:58):

Yeah. And I do think important as much as we will focus on individuals and what we can all do to focus on our mental health and our wellbeing, as we've talked about already, the big other piece is, what are our universities and hospitals and other institutions, what can they do to help people studying and working within them to be at their best? Because ultimately if we can help people feel good in the work that they're doing and the studying that they're doing, then we are going to get so much more from those people. And they will be so much more inspired and committed to work in school if they really are feeling in a good place. And so there's lot that... I think increasingly, you will know Teresa and in terms of the burnout conversation, for example, we know that we can offer things to individuals to help them with burnout if they're burned out because they're a clinical faculty in FHS, or if they're just a faculty or we can apply the burnout term to even students.

There's lots of things we can do on an individual basis. But again, there's lots of things we need to do in terms of how do we look at our universities and hospitals and how they're operating and the effects that has on people's mental health and intervening at the systemic level, not just at the individual level.

Dr. Teresa Chan (11:09):

All of this stuff, at the end of the day, it's more about systems, it's about systems and support and connecting it all. I think that we are starting to see that advancement in healthcare at large, with the advance of things like Ontario health teams and building that future vision on how we can do more preventative health rather than billing people out when they are actually critically ill. We'd like to get

ahead of that game if possible. And I think that's where we're hopefully hitting with mental health as well, but until such time, I think it'll be really an interesting to see innovations like yours and see how we can do that within some of our microsystems. And then maybe think about how we can scale it across all of healthcare as we start to learn more about how best to do this.

So, really exciting work that you're doing. I'm so excited to hear that we're really trying to take a center stage and put some resources and time and thought into how we can best support mental health and that mental health first aid that you're talking about and how we can actually improve the wellbeing of people all around from staff to trainees, to students, to faculty members, if we can be inclusive in all of that, I think it'll be a really exciting place to work and live. So thank you so much for sharing with us your thoughts and your ideas, and we'll look forward for more exciting news from the Okanagan Mental Health Task Force to see how we can all take part in this new journey. Thank you very much, Catherine.

Dr. Catherine Munn (12:35):

Thank you, Teresa.

Dr. Teresa Chan (12:36):

Thank you so much for tuning in to the MacPFD Spark Podcast. Just so you know, this podcast has been brought to you by the McMaster Faculty of Health Sciences and specifically the Office of Continuing Professional Development and the Program for Faculty Development. If you're interested in finding out more about what we can offer for faculty development check out our website at www.macpfd.ca that's www.M-A-C-P-F-D.ca. Many of our events are actually web events that are free. Finally, I'd like to thank our sound engineer Mr. Nick Hoskin who has been an amazing asset to our team, thanks so much Nick for all that you do. And also thank you to Scott Holmes for supplying us the music that you've been listening to. All right. So until next time this is MacPFD Spark signing off.