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Rachel Bell, Communications Intern
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Successful navigation in a new environment is a skill not everyone does well naturally. Some people easily find their way around, some are ok at it, and others are not so good at it. Brescia Psychology professor Dr. Jennifer Sutton knows the amount of experience people have with navigation can also affect how well they are able to perform this task. Dr. Sutton is currently examining how people use spatial skills when navigating an unfamiliar environment and how they use their “cognitive map” to effectively get from one destination to another. “A cognitive map is like having a bird’s eye view of your environment in your head that you can use to decide which direction one thing is from another,” describes Sutton. Her research has always centred on understanding how people and animals get around the world, and in her most recent study, she investigated how airplane pilots use their spatial abilities in a new landscape. People in spatially-demanding careers, like pilots and taxi drivers, often develop strong cognitive mapping skills through practice. Sutton explains, “We know from previous research that there are changes in the brain, specifically, with the hippocampus, that occur while taxi drivers are learning the layout of a major city; as they practice they become better at some things, and not so good at other things.” In collaboration with Dr. Suzanne Kears from Western University’s DAN Commercial Aviation Management program, Dr. Sutton and her students, Melanie Buset and Mikayla Keller, tested the ability of undergraduate student pilots to build a cognitive map of a virtual town environment. The student pilots were compared to non-pilots on several spatial navigation tasks in a highly realistic virtual town setting based on a popular gaming engine (Half Life 2). Sutton and her team found that the trained pilots performed better and had stronger cognitive mapping abilities than the non-pilots when navigating in an unfamiliar environment. The study findings were published in an article entitled, Navigation Experience and Mental Representations of the Environment: Do Pilots Build Better Cognitive Maps? (Sutton JE, Buset M, Keller, M (2014): PLoS ONE 9(3): e90058. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0090058).

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Dr. Janet Madill
Putting Research into Practice — Examining the Nutritional Needs of Liver Transplant Patients

Dr. Janet Madill is motivated to improve the nutrition and overall health of patients awaiting liver transplants with research-based findings and informed clinical practice. “There’s a paucity of research being conducted on nutrition and transplantation. If I can change someone’s nutritional status so they can live a longer, healthier life through research, then for me, that’s the strongest driving force.” Dr. Madill, an Assistant Professor in Food and Nutritional Sciences and a clinical dietician, was recently awarded a $20,000 research grant from the Canadian Foundation for Dietetic Research for her project entitled, An Investigation of the Relationship between Illness Severity and Energy Expenditure in Cirrhotic Candidates for Liver Transplantation. Madill and her co-investigators, Cindy Fournier (Brescia MScFN student), Lynne Sinclair (clinical dietician, London Health Sciences Centre), and Dr. Paul Marotta (Medical Director of Liver Transplantation Services, London Health Sciences Centre), will examine the nutritional status of patients with liver disease who are awaiting transplants in London over the next two years. Many liver transplant patients, like the ones in Madill’s study, have hepatitis C, a disease that affects roughly 350,000 Canadians and is a major cause of liver disease (cirrhosis). Malnutrition among patients with liver disease is common and directly connected to their survival rate, length of hospital stay, and quality of life both before and after the transplant. Madill’s research aims to find ways to ensure these patients are getting the best nutrition they can by looking at changes in their metabolism. Her study will use specific tools that measure patient energy needs and caloric intake before and after their transplant, which can help to identify those patients who are at a higher risk of not getting enough calories. Madill hopes another side benefit of her research will address issues surrounding Canada’s current organ donor shortage. A considerable amount of resources go into the transplant procedure, and health-care providers want to give organs to patients who are going to have the best expected outcome long term. “Patient nutrition is becoming a very important and integral component of the transplant process, and we are looking to the practice-based research evidence to gain more insight into how we can change a patient’s nutritional status,” Dr. Madill also wants to provide the best learning experience for her students. “I want to teach my students that you can’t isolate clinical dietetics and research; it’s integral in terms of our profession. In order for us to move forward as clinical dietitians, we have to do research.”

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This year, Professor Sharen and her colleague, Dr. Rosemary McGowan, did an analysis of 50 business cases from the Ivey Business School, which featured female decision makers. Professor Sharen is an award-winning case writer herself; however, her interest in how women are represented in business cases was sparked by an announcement from Harvard, stating that although 40 percent of incoming MBA students are women, only nine percent of cases feature female decision makers. This gross underrepresentation is yet to be accounted for, but Professor Sharen attributes this disconnect to the fact that there are not enough women in senior positions to write about. The lack of female decision makers being included in business cases is also symptomatic of the larger societal problem of the hidden curriculum, which is the assumption that a boss will be a white, straight male. Professor Sharen explains, “When we don’t show people who don’t fit that implicit picture, the assumption remains that the people in power are the people who have always been in power. So, by adding more female protagonists, we can show people that decision makers can be any gender, race, or sexual orientation.”

Along with analyzing how women are represented in business cases, Professor Sharen also focuses on what makes young girls interested in entrepreneurship. Brescia’s Just Own It conference is a new initiative that provides high school girls with the opportunity to be exposed to, explore, and experience entrepreneurship. To gauge how successful the conference is in inspiring young women to become entrepreneurs, participants will be surveyed before and after the conference. Professor Sharen hopes that girls will report an increase in understanding what entrepreneurship is, and interest in it.

In addition to tracking the changes in high school students’ interest in entrepreneurship, Professor Sharen also focuses on women in college and university. The Women’s Entrepreneurship Initiative (Her WLI) is an initiative she helped create that supports university and college women explore entrepreneurship and social enterprise as a career alternative and start businesses and social enterprises on their own. The initiative includes an entrepreneur program that focuses on making sure women have all the support, knowledge, and skills they need to be entrepreneurs.

“If you want to open a business, we will find a way to help you do it, and help you develop an idea that’s actually going to be viable, because coming up with an idea that will work is the greatest challenge,” Professor Sharen explains.

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By combining her passion, skills and knowledge in strategy, leadership, and organizational behaviour, Professor Sharen continues to explore new avenues for inspiring young women to become involved in entrepreneurship. She also hopes to discover why females are underrepresented as decision makers in business cases, and in doing so, find new ways to change this norm and empower young women.
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Seth, as prolific a graphic artist as Grace is a published author, inspired Grace in a number of ways. “Stepping into his house was like walking into my grandmother’s house. Everything from furniture to art is from the ‘40s, with no visible signs from the present day. Even electrical outlets are covered. Seth has no illusions that the past was a better era in which to live but enjoys the aesthetic from this time period.” Maclean’s magazine says of Seth’s work, “His impressive body of work reflects the world he wants to be in, rather than the one he lives in.”

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Dr. Jennifer Sutton: A Bird’s Eye View: Psychology Researcher Examines How Pilots Navigate Unfamiliar Environments

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