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MEDIA RELEASE

MSVU researcher receives \$1.2 million grant to study biological effects of war on aging

Halifax, Nova Scotia (March 10, 2021) – A gerontologist at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) is linking state-of-the-art advances in biological and DNA testing with social survey research to examine how traumatic events experienced during war can get ‘under the skin’ and influence the long-term health of survivors.

Dr. Zachary Zimmer, a Tier I Canada Research Chair and Director of the Global Aging Community Initiative was recently awarded \$1,250,776 over four years from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Project Grants to conduct this research in Vietnam among older Vietnamese people who survived conflict during the devastating Vietnam wars from 1955 to 1975.

The project that Dr. Zimmer is heading up, called “The Long-Term Effects of War on Biological Aging: The Case of Vietnam,” leverages an initial data collection effort funded by the National Institutes of Health in the U.S. entitled “The Vietnam Health and Aging Study (VHAS).” It involves an international multidisciplinary team of researchers from Canada, the U.S., Singapore, and Vietnam. The team will analyze data collected by VHAS from about 2,500 men and women who are now aged 60 and older.

“This CIHR funded study will allow us to investigate a wide number of outcomes and determine the ways in which war trauma changes our biological make-up and subsequently our health. Among other things, this will include DNA methylation, changes in cortisol, inflammatory proteins, and a large number of other biomarkers that will tell us whether and how war exposure, including direct, indirect, and secondary war experiences, has led to long-term scarring, or has bolstered people’s resilience, and ultimately has impacted how we age,” says Dr. Zimmer, who is also a Professor in the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology at MSVU.

“This is the perfect timing for a study of this nature in Vietnam. The Vietnamese population impacted by the war that ended in the 70s is now reaching the age where chronic diseases may manifest, and where markers of biological aging may be affected. The participants involved in this study were in their early teens to middle age at the height of the Vietnam war (1965-75),” says Dr. Zimmer.

Dr. Zimmer is coordinating the project that involves an international team of top experts doing interdisciplinary research on biological and social aging and the effects of wartime trauma, including Dr. Tran Toan, Associate Professor of Family Medicine at Hanoi Medical University; Dr. Kim Korinek, Director of the Asia Center and Asian Studies Program and Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Utah; Dr. Michael Kobor, Professor in the Department of Medical Genetics and Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Social Epigenetics, University of British Columbia; Dr. Alan Cohen, Assistant Professor in the Département de Médecine de Famille at Université de Sherbrooke; Dr. Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Co-Director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore; Dr. Deborah Norris, Professor in the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology at Mount Saint Vincent University; and Dr. Mevlude Akbulut-Yuksel, Professor of Economics at Dalhousie University.

The Vietnamese people were exposed to one of history's most brutal wars that affected men and women in the military, the militia, and civilians. War in Vietnam ensued on the battlefield and often right in neighborhoods and communities where people resided. The survivors live today in a country experiencing rapid demographic aging of its population. This presents a time-sensitive and unique opportunity to learn about the impacts of war on the long-term health of aging populations. Given the history of conflict and war around the world, this knowledge is essential for advancing global population health.

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