

Government of Canada awards \$2.5M to McMaster University to support the COVID-19 border study with McMaster HealthLabs

News Release

Toronto, October 30, 2020 – McMaster University has been awarded \$2.5 million from the Government of Canada to support the McMaster HealthLabs (MHL) *Canadian International COVID-19 Surveillance Border Study* at Toronto Pearson International Airport, being run in partnership with Air Canada and the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA).

The MHL study began in September 2020 and was established to gather data on COVID-19 rates of incoming international travellers, to help determine if an airport-based surveillance program is feasible, to determine whether self-collection of COVID-19 testing is effective and to explore options regarding the 14-day quarantine for international travellers.

The funding is provided through a partnership between Health Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

“We welcome the support and funding from the Government of Canada for this important COVID-19 research initiative,” said Dr. Marek Smieja, MHL scientific director, co-principal investigator of the Border Study and a professor of pathology and molecular medicine at McMaster. “This support will allow us to complete our follow up and analysis with a globally unique data set of passengers tested for COVID-19 three times during 14 days of quarantine and acknowledges the public health interest and potential impact of our study.”

The MHL Border Study will inform Canada’s potential strategies for border surveillance at airports and other points of entry.

“I want to congratulate Dr. Smieja and the whole team at McMaster HealthLabs, which stepped up quickly to work with universities, businesses and other partners to develop and test solutions to curb the social and economic impacts of COVID-19,” said the Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour and Member of Parliament for Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas. “Their work is another shining example of McMaster University’s leadership and commitment to addressing challenges facing Canadians.”

Karen Mossman, McMaster’s vice-president of research, recognized Health Canada and CIHR for its strategic investment, acknowledging the potential impact of the team’s work.

“This funding is a direct reflection of McMaster’s reputation as a leader in infectious disease research and trusted partner in the delivery of evidence-based results,” she said. “Under Marek’s leadership, this study holds the promise of improving the physical, mental and economic health of Canadians.”

“The Border Study will offer valuable insights into large-scale airport surveillance testing – from the feasibility of self-collected nasal-oral samples, to the logistics of testing, transportation and communication for so many travellers. We believe our findings will inform public policy not only in Canada, but around the world,” said Dr. Jack Gaudie, MHL’s board chair and scientific director of The Research Institute of St. Joe's Hamilton, where the laboratory testing methods for this study were developed and performed by Dr. David Bulir.

The Border Study is being conducted in accordance with research ethics board-approved scientific protocols. Consenting participants provide a sample to MHL researchers before leaving the airport and then supply two additional samples self-collected at seven and fourteen days after arrival, coinciding with Canada’s current quarantine period.

“We regard the Government of Canada’s commitment as important support and believe the study will provide critical data to assist policy makers in adopting a science-based approach for devising safe alternatives to current travel restrictions and quarantine requirements,” said Dr. Jim Chung, Air Canada’s Chief Medical Officer.

“The Greater Toronto Airports Authority remains committed to a science-based approach that prioritizes the health and wellbeing of passengers and airport workers. The work that McMaster HealthLabs has done to-date is invaluable,” said Craig Bradbrook, Chief Operating Officer, GTAA. “The support of the Government of Canada is welcome news and we are grateful for the assistance.”

An independent analysis of Border Study data will be conducted at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto under the supervision of the Principal Investigators, Dr. Marek Smieja and Dr. Vivek Goel, who will have responsibility for publishing the results in peer reviewed journals and for supporting MHL in broadly sharing the study’s findings. An interim report of study findings is expected to be released mid-November.

About McMaster University

McMaster University is Canada’s most research-intensive university and is consistently ranked as one of the world’s Top 100 universities. Together, our researchers, students and staff advance human and societal health and well-being, creating a Brighter World.

About McMaster HealthLabs

McMaster HealthLabs (MHL) is a non-profit organization that develops COVID-19 research initiatives and testing solutions to keep Canadians safe and to get them back to work. MHL works with a team of scientists and doctors from McMaster University, the Research Institute of St.

Joe's Hamilton in Ontario, and other Canadian universities and research organizations. MHL partners with Verto Health, leveraging its innovative digital twin technology solutions in MHL research initiatives. MHL collaborates with Deloitte Canada for strategic and operational advisory support on this study. MHL is focused on curbing the human, economic and social costs of COVID-19 by creating scientific research initiatives that help Canadian leaders make evidence-based decisions. For more information, please visit: mcmasterhealthlabs.ca.

Media Contacts:

McMaster University

Michelle Donovan
Manager, Media Relations
905-512-8548
donovam@mcmaster.ca

McMaster HealthLabs

media@mcmasterhealthlabs.ca