

Researchers hope to study how Olympics affect public health

Project is one of several potential Games-related studies

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 29, 2009

Public health researchers are hoping the 2010 Olympics will give them valuable insight into the effect a mega-event like the Vancouver Games can have on a population.

They're not wishing for a disaster, but they are looking at how events such as the Olympics can dramatically affect public health, whether it's a communicable disease like the H1N1 flu, the pressure on a hospital system of a mass-casualty accident, or the prolonged effects of traffic-related air pollution.

Until now, researchers for the most part haven't developed ideas about how to use the Vancouver Games to scientifically explore those effects.

Today, however, more than 90 institution-based scientists hope to map out at least half a dozen research projects they want to conduct around the 2010 Games.

The potential projects will be discussed in a symposium organized by the B.C. Environmental and Occupational Health Research Network.

Tim Takaro, a health sciences researcher at Simon Fraser University and workshop coordinator, said the network will award half a dozen seed grants of about \$10,000 each for a variety of Olympic-related projects.

Health research around the Olympics isn't a new concept, and some major events, such as the 1996 Atlanta and 2008 Beijing Summer Games are still being studied.

New findings will be presented at the conference on air pollution studies in Beijing and reduced respiratory problems during the Atlanta Games as a result of traffic restrictions.

With several hundred thousand visitors expected to be in Vancouver, the Olympics provides a rare study opportunity, Takaro said.

"There's an opportunity to look at the social phenomenon, the infections/disease phenomenon, flu, air pollution and the effects of travel, as well as the effects of restricting travel," he said.

"All of those things are natural experiments that pertain to public health because they relate to exposures."

Most of the research will involve studies conducted before, during and after the Games, he said. Some, such as an examination of air quality, could take upwards of a year after the Games to be completed.

Ultimately the findings will all be given to universities, governments and the International Olympic Committee.

"I would hope what will come from this is to help cities plan traffic-free zones, for example, or plan better where to site schools, businesses and residences," Takaro said.

"I am hoping it contributes to the province's ability to track infectious disease, to prepare for the next pandemic, or to plan for surge capacity in hospital emergency rooms."

The network was set up in 2005 with a large grant from the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research.

jefflee@vancouversun.com

See more stories on the 2010 Winter Games at vancouversun.com/olympics

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun