



# OCS

OHTN COHORT STUDY

## Abby's Departure

We are truly sad to announce the departure of Abigail Kroch from the OHTN as of May 1, 2024. Over the past seven years, Abby has been a driving force behind scientific projects and advancements, along with team and community building among staff, community members, scientists and researchers involved in the OCS. She has transformed many aspects of the OCS with excellence and care.

During her time as principal investigator, the OCS expanded to more clinics, and engaged more participants, community members, researchers, and students. In addition to her commitment to advancing the representativeness of the OCS, Abby was keen to promote and ensure diversity and equity among the OCS team and OCS committees. She prioritized recruiting governance and scientific committee members from diverse backgrounds, especially from African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) and Indigenous communities. She was instrumental in initiating and developing research, community relations and knowledge-sharing with Indigenous Peoples and communities. This included the formation of the OCS Indigenous Data Governance Circle and the expansion of the OCS to clinics in northern Ontario. Her efforts were genuine and grounded in her dedication to equity and the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Beyond that, she was devoted to making the OCS questionnaire more inclusive and accessible to OCS participants, including women, trans and gender diverse folks, newcomers, and long-term survivors.



Abby spearheaded many technical innovations for the OCS. She led the creation of the OCS Data Administration Portal (ODAP), an online data system that allowed OCS sites to enter standardized clinical data, deploy the annual questionnaire, and support OCS sub-study linkages. Further she led the construction of the OCS Data Warehouse to store historical clinical and questionnaire data in an easy and accessible manner. The combination of ODAP and the OCS Data Warehouse have allowed for the access of 'real-time' OCS data. She also contributed to the advancement of data sharing procedures and the OCS website to expedite data availability to researchers and communities interested in using OCS data. This has led not only to an increasing number of research projects and sub-studies using OCS data but dissemination of the OCS data to a wider audience and subsequently helping to improve the quality of life of people living and at risk of HIV.

Her scientific knowledge and foresight played a pivotal role in keeping the OCS responsive to shifting research and community needs. When the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March 2020, she quickly adapted the OCS to meet the challenging new landscape: COVID-19 related questions were quickly added to the OCS questionnaire; video-conferencing was introduced to the research protocol; necessary technical logistics were taken care of; and data collectors were trained for remote data collection. Because of these adjustments, the OCS continued without interruption.

Beyond her role in the OCS, Abby has been key to fostering a positive and inclusive work environment within Data and Applied Science at the OHTN. She has been a true mentor and friend, always empowering us in our roles and prioritizing our team's well-being and growth. Her support and encouragement inspired us on a daily basis to strive for better, not only as a team member but as a person. Her OHTN team will deeply miss her transformative presence that brought so much laughter and put a smile on our faces in every single encounter. We are eternally grateful to Abby, for her impact on OCS research, on our team, and the larger OCS community.

We congratulate Abby on her exciting new position at the California Department of Public Health as the Branch Chief for Communicable Disease and Emergency Response. She will be responsible for electronic disease surveillance for the State of California.

Abby, thank you for everything that you have done for our team, for the OCS, and for the HIV community! Your legacy will remain and continue to inspire us.





### **Welcoming OCS Interim PI**

Dr. Ann Burchell returned to the OCS as Interim Principal Investigator effective May 1, 2024. Ann was a 'Scientist and Director of OCS' at the OHTN between 2010-2015. Now a Scientist at the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health Toronto, and a Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine, Temerty Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Ann is also a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Sexually Transmitted Infection Prevention. She will be working with the OHTN to prepare an open competition for a chair award for a new Principal Investigator.

We appreciate Ann's support leading the OCS research and team during this transitional time, and look forward to working under her guidance

### **New Site PI at Hamilton Health Sciences Centre**

We would like to welcome back Dr. Marek Smieja as the new site PI and express our thanks to the outgoing site PI Dr. Philippe El-Helou for his contributions to the OCS over the years. Dr. El-Helou led a productive team of data collectors at the site. Thanks to Dr. Smieja's involvement, Hamilton will carry on its critical role in the implementation of the OCS.

### **Changes to the OCS Study Team**

OCS welcomes five new site staff members who joined the team at Lakeridge Positive Care Clinic: Carly Chisholm, Sarah Dulmage, Cathy Bailey, Rachel White and Timothy D'Eon.

We thank all OCS site staff for their dedication and commitment to the work.

### **New OCS Summer Intern**

We would like to welcome Rawan Abulibdeh as our OCS summer intern from the AI4PH internship program. Rawan is a third-year PhD candidate in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Toronto. Rawan's research interest lies in machine learning, natural language processing, and health informatics. Her doctoral project specifically aims to create and test an applied machine learning tool/system to enable phenotyping patients' social determinants of health from electronic health records. Her main goal is to work in public health to help create a more equitable health environment in Canada. She will be using her experience with machine learning models to clean the OCS ARV medication data. We are lucky to have Rawan join our team and look forward to sharing her work with you.

We bid farewell to OCS research intern Nicholas Bauer and wish him success in his future endeavours. Nicholas's work examined frailty among Indigenous OCS participants and showed greater rates of pre-frailty and clinical frailty and disproportionate burdens of aging-related comorbidities among Indigenous participants than non-Indigenous OCS participants.

We encourage students interested in an internship or practicum opportunity with the OCS to contact us at [ocs@ohtn.on.ca](mailto:ocs@ohtn.on.ca).

### **Closure of Blue Door**

After 4 years of collaboration for the OCS, the OHTN discontinued its partnership with Regent Park Community Health Centre (Blue Door) for logistical reasons. This site has been helpful to obtain data about people living with HIV who have limited or no health insurance. We thank Dr. Alan Li, the site PI, and all past and current staff members of the clinic for their contributions and involvement in the OCS.

## OCS QUICK FACTS

### Impact of Adverse Childhood Events on health of people living with HIV (PLWH).

Adverse childhood events (ACEs) such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, parental divorce, exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV), or mental illness or incarceration among family members can have a long-lasting impact on the health of people living with HIV (PLWH). Psychosocial resources such as resilient coping and social support can buffer the negative impacts of ACEs on health.

- Among 2,256 OCS participants who provided data in 2021-2022, 71.4% experienced at least one form of ACEs.
- Experiencing ACEs, in turn, was directly associated with current depressive symptoms (i.e. PLWH who reported a higher number of ACEs experienced greater burden of depressive symptoms).
- On the other hand, our data showed that people with higher levels of resilient coping and social support experienced lower levels of depressive symptoms.
- After controlling for participants' demographic characteristics, we found that resilient coping and social support significantly moderated the relationship between ACEs on depressive symptoms (i.e. PLWH with higher levels of coping and social support experienced lower levels of depressive symptoms, regardless of the number of ACEs they experienced).

These findings suggest that interventions that boost coping skills and social support may help improve mental health of PLWH who experienced ACEs.

### OCS Productivity in 2023

Data collectors did an excellent job in 2023, completing a total of 2,392 interviews.

- 2023 questionnaire completion increased 4% compared to 2022, 19% compared to 2020 and was slightly lower than in 2021.
- There were 4,501 active participants at 15 OCS sites at the end of 2023. This number increased by 3% from 2022 and 6% from 2021.
- There were 360 new consents: an increase of 35% compared to 2022. New participants accounted for 15% of the 2023 questionnaires and 8% of the total cohort.

We thank our sites, data collectors, and participants for their dedication and contributions to the OCS.

### OCS at 2024 CAHR

The 33rd Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research ([CAHR 2024](#)) took place in London, Ontario, April 25th-28th, 2024. Members of the OCS team and collaborators attended the conference and gave a total of 15 poster and oral presentations addressing various issues pertaining to people living with HIV in Ontario, including:

- Adverse childhood experiences and depression
- Experiences in physical activity and tele-coaching
- Uptake and interest in injectable ARVs
- Occurrence of virologic failure
- Changes in physical activity, body composition and strength across an online community-based exercise (CBE) intervention study
- Life experiences pre- and post-migration
- Sexual behaviour, partner choice, and prevention practices among gay, bisexual and queer cis-men
- Virtual care and health outcomes
- Changes in cannabis use associated with legalization
- Medical cannabis survey of health care providers in Canada
- Understanding goal setting and goal achievement
- Experiences of HIV stigma
- SARS-CoV-2 seroprevalence

For posters and slides: <https://ohtncohortstudy.ca/research>

The Ontario HIV Treatment Network Cohort Study (OCS) is an ongoing research study that collects clinical, social and behavioural information about people living with HIV (PLWH) in Ontario. Participation in the study is voluntary, and all personally identifying information of study participants is removed to ensure confidentiality. The OCS was established to improve our understanding of HIV and inform HIV prevention, care and treatment strategies for people living with HIV and groups at risk of HIV infection. For more information about the OCS, please visit [ohtncohortstudy.ca](https://ohtncohortstudy.ca) or email [ocs@ohtn.on.ca](mailto:ocs@ohtn.on.ca).