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NEW STUDY LENDS SUPPORT TO VICTIMS WHO BELIEVE THEY WERE DRUGGED AND SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

TORONTO (June 16, 2010) – New toxicology findings reveal the presence of drugs and/or alcohol in 76 per cent of women and men who suspect they were victims of drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA). Of those, 64 per cent did not report voluntarily consuming the drugs found, supporting their belief that they may have been slipped a drug. In addition, unexpected male DNA was found in a substantial number of cases, confirming sexual activity.

The study, available at www.sciencedirect.com and to be published in the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* builds on previous findings showing that one in five sexual assault victims believe they were drugged prior to the assault, 96 per cent of whom were women.

“Our findings support the need to establish standards for DFSA care that include toxicological and biological testing,” says Dr. Janice Du Mont, research scientist, Women’s College Research Institute and one of the principal investigators of the study. “We now know that results from such tests can not only lend support to victims’ concerns that they were drugged and sexually assaulted but also aid in the identification of substances that may have been used to incapacitate them.”

The study, which was funded by Echo: Improving Women's Health in Ontario, an agency of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, involved toxicology and biology screening of women who visited an Ontario Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Treatment Centre (SADVTC).

“This study not only highlights the importance of testing for drugs in suspected drug-facilitated sexual assaults, but researchers also recommend awareness-raising measures to reduce DFSA in the first place,” says Pat Campbell, CEO, Echo. “Echo will support the research team and the care providers to apply these findings to policy and practice.”

Toxicology testing on urine samples collected from 178 participants who met criteria for suspected DFSA found drugs and/or alcohol in 135 cases. Sixty-four per cent of those were unexpected – that is, were drugs that had not been reported as having been voluntarily consumed. The most common unexpected substances were street drugs (e.g., cannabinoids, cocaine, amphetamines), analgesics (e.g., codeine, morphine) and anti-anxiety medications (e.g., lorazepam).

Dr. Du Mont notes that “Rohypnol, which has garnered the most attention as a ‘date rape drug’, was not found in any of the samples.” She points out that when it comes to sexual assault “it is critical to understand that a woman incapacitated by drugs or alcohol is not able to consent to sexual activity whether she has consumed the substances voluntarily and/or was slipped a drug.”

As part of the study, biological testing was also conducted on vaginal, oral and rectal swabs from 150 cases that met the criteria for suspected DFSA. Male DNA was found in 64 cases; in 47 per cent the finding was unexpected as the client denied having had consensual vaginal/oral/anal intercourse in the week prior to being examined.

"Our advice to women who believe they may be a victim of a drug-facilitated sexual assault is to go to their local sexual assault and domestic violence treatment centre or emergency department as soon as possible," says Sheila Macdonald, co-principal investigator of the study and provincial co-ordinator, SADVTC. "We have a higher chance of identifying unexpected drugs or DNA the sooner a victim is tested."

While many women already safeguard their drinks and use caution when accepting drinks from others, the researchers stress that sexual violence is a societal issue and there is a collective responsibility to intervene whenever possible to prevent sexual assaults from occurring in the first place.

Seven SADVTCs representing the diverse communities across Ontario participated in the study including Women's College Hospital, Toronto; Scarborough Hospital – Birchmount Division, Scarborough; Guelph General Hospital, Guelph; Lake of the Woods District Hospital, Kenora; Hamilton Health Sciences Centre, Hamilton; Ottawa Hospital – Civic Campus, Ottawa; and Renfrew Victoria Hospital, Renfrew.

Further research about sexual assault and violence against women is being conducted as part of the *Violence & Health Research Program* at Women's College Research Institute.

About Women's College Research Institute

Women's College Hospital has established Canada's largest research institute dedicated solely to generating knowledge about women's health. Called the Women's College Research Institute (WCRI), it is leading the charge in breakthrough research and charting the path globally in new developments.

Over the past decade, WCRI's work has had a substantial impact worldwide. Breech births are safer because of its research. Women's College Hospital is a world leader in understanding the genetics of breast and ovarian cancers. And it is now possible to identify the potential for osteoporosis in young women.

Today, as Canada's only facility that tests women's health care innovations within an ambulatory care community, WCRI continues to forge new ground as it focuses on key areas of women's health and sex- and gender-based medicine: women and violence, mental health, genetics and cancer, obstetrics, osteoporosis, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS.

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