

# KEYNOTE



Plain language summary

Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2022: Keynote Address

## MEETING VETERANS' NEEDS AS THEY AGE

### OVERVIEW

Canada's Veterans are aging. Keynote speaker, Dr. Samir Sinha, an international expert in the care of older adults, says it's time to adapt to better meet the needs of Canada's aging Veterans. Dr. Sinha is the architect of Ontario's Seniors Strategy and a driving force advocating for the development of a **National Seniors Strategy for Canada through his work as the director of health policy research at the National Institute on Ageing.**

Dr. Sinha's presentation at the Military and Veteran Health Research Forum in October 2022 is summarized here. His objective is to help the military and security community:

- Understand the rapidly shifting demographics of Canada's aging Veterans
- Appreciate the unique challenges facing aging Veterans
- Anticipate and manage their needs with strategies and frameworks

### WHY IT MATTERS

The age distribution of Canada's Veteran population has been shifting. Canada's WWII and Korean War Veterans have been declining significantly in their numbers over the past few decades. Canadian Armed Forces Veterans represent those who have served thereafter. In 2003, Canadian Armed Forces Veterans were a young population, with only 6% over age 70. According to recent data from Statistics Canada, there are 461,000 Veterans in the country, with an average age of 61 years. By 2026, 1 in 3 Veterans will be aged 70 years or older (Statistics Canada).

### KEY FACTS ABOUT CANADIAN VETERANS

While this overall population is decreasing in size, more Veterans are getting older. Recent Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) surveys provide an evolving profile, including these findings from 2019:

- 52% of Veterans actively use health services
- 12% of Veterans use homecare services
- 1 in 3 Veterans uses mental health services

**The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) works to engage academic and government researchers, facilitate new research, increase research capacity, and foster knowledge translation. CIMVHR hosts an annual Forum that brings together thought leaders to present new research, exchange ideas, share insights, learn, and collaborate with the shared objective of serving military and veteran health needs.**

# KEYNOTE

- 1 in 4 needs help with one or more daily life activities
- Nearly 1 in 8 has a partner who provides support as an unpaid caregiver

In addition, mental health visits have increased significantly in recent years.

## CHALLENGES FACING OUR AGING VETERAN POPULATION

### Chronic diseases

Across the Veteran population, researchers are seeing higher rates of:

- Physical and mental health disorders
- Chronic diseases like high blood pressure, arthritis, depression, and anxiety
- Musculoskeletal and mental health disorders (appearing earlier in their lives)

These issues are leading to more medical releases from service.

### Evolving role of military members

Service members are experiencing change in the work they do: missions now are often different from past combat or peacekeeping missions or from what they expect. In their role, they may see more:

- Exposure to trauma-related deployments
- Climate-related events, such as hurricane Fiona in Atlantic Canada
- Demand to help in other areas, such as with Indigenous communities and in long-term care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic

These complex roles can affect health and wellness over time.

### Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and aging

With a significant increase in the reporting of PTSD among Veterans, it's important to consider the effect of comorbidities. Patients with PTSD often have other physical and mental disorders, and these issues can last a lifetime.

- In a study of Veterans with PTSD, many experienced functional impairments and reduced quality of life 50 years after service
- PTSD can increase the risk of developing dementia or complicate how dementia presents and evolves
- Gaps in care and overlapping symptoms can make PTSD and dementia challenging to diagnose and manage

Understanding a Veteran's military service experience is critical to getting the correct diagnosis and providing effective care and ongoing treatment.

### Growing Diversity in the ranks

The changing military population also matters. Women represent one-fifth of the Canadian Armed Forces population and is on the rise. Women also represent 1 in 6 Veterans. The following issues are important to their care as they age:

- Women experience higher rates of health issues that limit activities, such as chronic pain
- Women are medically released from service more often than males, often due to mental health and

# KEYNOTE

musculoskeletal issues

- Female members are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual misconduct, assault, or discrimination, and this can impact their mental health well beyond their release from service

## PLANNING TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF CANADA'S AGING VETERANS

There are more Veterans today living longer than ever before. They are also aging with a greater level of complexity than the general Canadian population and are dealing with more physical and mental health issues. Veterans want to live independently in their own homes as they age, for as long as possible and we should support them to do so.

### Guidance for military and community planners

- **Identify and address priority issues for Veterans:** Provide support to help understand the issues facing aging Veterans to better enable wellness and prevention, remain productive, engaged citizens and to enable more ageing in place.
- **Emphasize the provision of preventative care:** Support people when they are young to make healthier life choices and stay focused on wellness and prevention opportunities as they age. Identify mental health and musculoskeletal issues early, with a focus on chronic disease management.
- **Rethink traditional approaches to providing long-term care:** As Veterans want to age in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, it's important to ensure that current and future Veteran support programs enable ageing-in-the-right-place.
- **Provide care close to home:** Find ways to support people to age in their homes and their communities for as long as possible. Identify and plan for the right mix of services, such as housekeeping, laundry, and transportation.
- **Support unpaid caregivers:** In Canada, 8.1 million people are unpaid caregivers, including 1 in 3 people in the workplace. By 2050, there will be 30% fewer close family members available to provide unpaid care. We can't take unpaid caregiving for granted. Caregivers must be included in our aging strategies.

### Tools and ideas to support aging Veterans

Dr. Sinha pointed to the National Seniors Strategy as a source of tools and ideas to better support aging Veterans. Other examples of progressive programs and services include:

- **Veterans Independence Program:** Provides funding to cover the costs of home care services so aging Veterans can stay at home.
- **Medical Foster Home Program:** The United States Department of Veterans Affairs provides special programs for aging Veterans, including funding for up to three veterans to live in a private home with a caregiver.
- **PTSD and dementia training:** The U.S. National Center for PTSD provides a course for healthcare professionals working with people living with dementia and PTSD.

# KEYNOTE



## KEY MESSAGES FOR LEADERS AND RESEARCHERS

- **The military population is getting older and living with complex health needs.** The prevalence of some health issues – such as musculoskeletal, anxiety, depression, and PTSD – is higher than Canadians of similar age and sex. These disorders are also showing up earlier in Veterans and are more complex to manage.
- **Mental health care needs of Veterans are increasing.** Mental health care visits have increased over the past three years. We must implement more holistic approaches and solutions to better support ageing Veterans.
- **More research is needed to understand gender gaps.** VAC is serving a growing number of aging female Veterans. We must understand and plan for their unique needs.
- **Most Veterans want to stay at home for as long as possible as they age.** It's important that we honour their military service and evolving care needs. Enabling Veterans to age at home with support services can enable both ageing in place and offers significant cost savings.
- **There are long waitlists for aged care in Canada.** Today's aging Veterans will be challenged more than ever to age in place. With the right mix of supports and programs, we can help more of them to age in place for as long as possible.

This is a plain language summary of the plenary session, "Addressing our Coming of Age for Canada's Veterans," at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) Forum on October 19, 2022, in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

**Speaker: Dr. Samir Sinha**, Professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto, Director of Geriatrics at Sinai Health System and the University Health Network, Director of Health Policy Research at the National Institute on Ageing

See the video: **CIMVHR Forum 2022 Wednesday Morning Plenary**