

Humans more diverse than we allow

March 29 2011, By Kelly Rankin

A question central to Gillian Einstein's research is, How can I do science that would not make essentialist assumptions about the body?

Paraphrasing [sociologist](#) Myra Hird, Einstein, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology and Dalla Lana School of Public Health, said it's very odd that we think about diversity in other species but we don't think of diversity among humans. "For us, there are two of us, there's male and there is female," she said.

Einstein, a neuroscientist who works primarily in the fields of neurodegenerative disease, cognitive neuroscience and sex-based biology, also believes we need to re-evaluate the monolithic category called women, where all women are treated the same, and create new ways of understanding women's health. The narrow focus and the lack of interdisciplinary research in women's health prompted Einstein to establish the collaborative graduate program in women's health four years ago.

"There's a reflection inherent in all these disciplines [medicine, humanities and social sciences] coming together, it is the kind of reflection we want to have on the body," Einstein said.

For example, she says the current biomedical model, where we have one variable and everything else remains constant, is not really true. The assumption is that altering the body, for example removing ovaries to cure cancer, won't cause any problems for the body. It is similar to saying you expect to be able to remove the cornerstone from a building

without causing any residual effects.

“You might not get ovarian cancer but other things do happen in the body,” said Einstein. “To have informed choice, and possibly to mitigate that effect, we need to really understand what happens to this complex system we call the body.”

Another issue of importance to health is how the environment affects gene signalling, which requires an understanding of the context in which individuals live. If, for instance, a daughter and her mother grow up living two very different lives, does this information, the circumstances of their experiences, have any bearing on their individual health and assumptions about hereditary diseases?

“Then it becomes a question of what is particular to this person that is actually affecting her health. Each person then becomes her own unit and has her own ecological niche and life conditions,” said Einstein.

Exploring questions like these through an interdisciplinary lens is what makes the collaborative graduate program in women’s health unique.

“I think it’s something special about U of T, there isn’t another program like this, as far as I know, internationally,” said Einstein.

Currently, there are 25 students enrolled in the program from disciplines as varied as, religion, anthropology and the health sciences.

“I think of it as a hub for thinking about medicine, bodies and integrating gender into the medical school curriculum,” said Einstein. “It’s a place for foment, as well as a place for training students. ”

Provided by University of Toronto

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