

NIK WEST

EDGEwise

People with mental illnesses are said to smoke at two to four times the rate of the general population, and purchase about 44 per cent of all tobacco products sold in North America.

UVic's applied theatre program has created plays on such topics as seniors and driving, new immigrant women, memory loss, and environmental sustainability.

The application of theatre in non-traditional settings dates back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. UVic's applied theatre program has been involved with such community partners as the Royal BC Museum, the Eldercare Foundation, the Intercultural Association and UVic's Centre on Aging.

Lauren Jerke is one of 330 graduate students receiving a degree at UVic's Fall Convocation ceremonies next month.

Research funding to UVic graduate students from the three federal granting councils and other external agencies has steadily increased over the last 10 years, to a total of \$4.8 million in 2010/11.



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University of Victoria Research

Clearing the air

Applied theatre shines spotlight on tobacco addiction and mental illness

Jerke

by John Threfall

Quitting smoking can be tough, but imagine the added pressure of trying to quit while living with a mental illness. University of Victoria applied theatre researcher Lauren Jerke doesn't have to imagine this scenario—she wrote a play about it.

After spending 18 months working with the Vancouver Island Health Authority's (VIHA) smoking cessation and reduction group at Victoria's Eric Martin Pavilion, and researching the relationship between smoking and mental illness, Jerke and members from the group developed their findings into an original play, *Mixed Messages*.

Because applied theatre is equally focused on fostering dialogue and entertaining audiences, Jerke's research dovetailed perfectly with VIHA's concerns.

"Applied theatre is the use of theatre for extra-theatrical purposes, like community-building, social change and education—and it almost always does all three at the same time," she explains.

"Applied theatre has inherent therapeutic value," Jerke adds. "It helps people think about their addictions in different ways.

Getting your addiction up on its feet—giving it a mask and lines and a character—makes you think about it a lot differently."

Which, of course, is the key. Unlike shows that simply entertain, applied theatre is intended for non-traditional settings like schools, prisons, retirement homes, hospitals and other health-care settings. The twin issues of smoking and mental illness made an ideal pairing.

Mixed Messages focuses on how social culture and direct targeting by the smoking industry has resulted in rampant tobacco addictions among people living with mental illness.

"Some doctors have been convinced by the tobacco industry that allowing people with a mental illness to smoke is 'self-medication' and that it eases their symptoms," says Jerke. "The tobacco companies went as far as sending complimentary cartons of cigarettes to psychiatric institutions."

There hasn't been enough support in hospitals for people living with mental illness who want to quit smoking, says Jerke. "Health care professionals need to know that these people have been directly targeted, that smoking is not self-medication, and that it's

making some symptoms worse."

The 15-scene play was performed by three patients plus Jerke herself, with another three working backstage. Roles ranged from the expected (smokers, parents, kids, nurses, psychiatric patients, tobacco executives) to the imaginative (cowboys, ghosts, a ventriloquist).

The play was performed four times to a total of 160 people, and drew an impressive response from doctors, psychiatrists and patients.

"Afterwards, the smoking cessation group got a great deal more phone calls than usual, as well as referrals from doctors," says Jerke. "They were pretty busy handling all of the interest the play had generated."

Next month, Jerke receives her master's degree at UVic Convocation. She's now one of four instructors with UVic's applied theatre program and looks forward to putting her training to work with as many groups as possible.

"A play can really show what an issue is, and it can hit a lot harder than just words on a poster," she says. "As a theatre artist, I know it can be incredibly effective in educating audiences and initiating dialogue."