Even the best research can fall short of its potential, unless its results receive wide exposure and are put to practical use by a broad range of health-care professionals.

With that in mind, Dr. Phyllis Zelkowitz has a key objective as the newly appointed Director of Research in the Department of Psychiatry: To forge new links and strengthen existing bonds with the JGH’s other departments and with relevant community agencies.

“We’ve got a wonderful group of researchers and we’re successful in getting grants. Now we need to make people more aware of our work,” says Dr. Zelkowitz, who took up her post on July 1.

Dr. Zelkowitz’s division is well known for work on social, cultural and environmental factors that affect mental health. As well, there is a strong interest in the psychosocial aspects of serious medical illness. For example, researchers in the Psychiatry Department have looked at the family relationships of cancer patients to understand what helps these patients cope with their illness.

According to Dr. Zelkowitz, this involves research in areas such as transcultural psychiatry, where effective treatment takes into account the cultural background of immigrants and other patients from particular countries and cultures.

Since Psychiatry researchers are based in the Institute of Community and Family Psychiatry (ICFP), which is not physically attached to the hospital but is at the north-west corner of Côte Ste-Catherine and Légaré, new ways must be found to strengthen the ties between researchers and clinicians in different departments of the hospital.

One possible solution, Dr. Zelkowitz suggests, may be the introduction of a series of themed Research Days, in which JGH staff meet with psychiatric researchers to compare notes on subjects of mutual interest.

“We should also be branching out to share more information with the CLSCs, with various community agencies and with professionals in the mental health field. Our goal should be not just to create knowledge, but to share it as extensively as possible so that others can benefit from what we study.”

Dr. Zelkowitz, who has spent 15 years at the ICFP, also intends to continue her own research, despite the added workload that comes with her appointment. However, she has had to give up her clinical work in child psychiatry.

Her particular interest is children and families, including issues such as postpartum depression, the long-term behavioural outcomes of babies born prematurely, and personality disorders of children from severely troubled families.

LADY DAVIS INSTITUTE FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH

Researchers’ breakthroughs earn patent protection

Somewhere between the “Eureka!” of the laboratory and the arrival of a new medical product in the marketplace, a patent is required. So it might surprise you to learn that patents play a significant role at the Lady Davis Institute, where commercial pursuits take a back seat to scientific investigation.

But think about it: What good is a medical breakthrough if it isn’t transformed into something that doctors and patients can actually use? And in order for the product to be commercially viable, it needs the exclusivity and protection that the patent provides.

Dr. Erica Besso, Liaison and Business Development Officer in the Office of Technology Transfer at the JGH and McGill University, says that just the filing of a patent application can be sufficient protection to alert potential commercial partners to the importance of a particular discovery.

For this reason, she says, the odds of commercial success are greater if a patent application is filed prior to making a public disclosure, rather than simply publishing the findings in a scientific journal.

According to Dr. Besso, scientists at the Lady Davis Institute are inventors connected with several patents issued during the past few years. These cover such items as a plant extract with cancer-fighting abilities, and a synthetic molecule that mimics the behaviour of a natural enzyme.

Applications have also been filed for:

- a new way to understand and potentially inhibit the replication of the HIV virus