



Working could be bad for your health

Immigrant job overqualification can affect mental wellbeing

By Lisa Evans

He's a taxi driver with a PhD in microphysics. One can imagine the boredom and frustration the PhD taxi driver faces as he hauls luggage out of the trunk and swerves in an out of traffic as the agitated businessperson in the backseat yells at him to go faster, mocks his foreign accent, then ponies up a \$2 tip.

A new study published in the *Journal of Ethnicity and Health* demonstrates that earning below one's potential may not just impact their wallet, but immigrants' health as well.

It is an accepted fact that immigrants arrive in Canada in better health and with higher levels of education than Canadian-born individuals, but over time they tend to lose this advantage. This phenomenon is known as the "healthy immigrant effect." The study seeks to explain this lost advantage by highlighting the as-

sociation between job overqualification and declines in mental and physical health among new immigrants to Canada over a four-year period.

According to the authors of the study, Cynthia Chen, Peter Smith and Cameron Mustard, "As the Canadian labour market continues to increase its dependency on immigration, more needs to be done to help immigrants to effectively integrate into the Canadian labour market, into occupations which are commensurate with their education, experience and expectations. Based on our results, not only doing so will likely result in both economic losses through skill underutilization, and large health consequences on immigrants and their families."

The study examined non-refugee immigrants who were working within four years of their arrival in Canada, and asked

questions about their physical and mental health, recording changes in their health behaviours.

While overqualified immigrants were no more likely to experience worsening physical health than immigrants who were not overqualified for their jobs, they were 40 per cent more likely to report prolonged feelings of sadness, depression and loneliness — emotional and mental health concerns that could manifest into physical symptoms including cardiovascular stress.

While at the time of their immigration, those followed in the study tended to be in better health than native-born residents, over time this health advantage was eroded. The study attributes this declining health advantage to job overqualification.

Of those who took part in the study, approximately 58 per cent of immigrants with post-second-

ary education held positions that were below their educational qualifications. This figure is 25 per cent higher than the proportion of overqualified workers who graduated from post-secondary institutions in Canada.

Job overqualification can have a number of negative psychological effects including lower self-esteem, chronic stress caused by one's inability to control their employment status and a decreased sense of their own personal value. What is particularly shocking is that this deterioration of mental health occurred over a relatively short period of time — only four years.

While Canadian immigration policy is designed to select highly skilled, healthy immigrants for admission into the country, without proper utilization of their educational credentials and work experience, it is unlikely that new immigrants will achieve their full potential productivity, negatively affecting Canada's economy, society and health care system. The study concludes that the Canadian immigration system is in desperate need of reform. 🍀