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UHN abruptly shuts mental health clinic for Chinese Canadians — and former patients and community members are sounding the alarm

The Asian Initiative in Mental Health program at Toronto Western will see services integrated into Outpatient Mental Health and Addictions Services.

By [Nathan Bawaan](#) - Staff Reporter

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Soon after coming to Canada as a refugee from Hong Kong in late 2021, [Joy Luk](#) found herself admitted to Toronto Western Hospital.



Joy Luk, a former patient through UHN's AIM, standing outside Toronto Western Hospital.
Nick Lachance/Toronto Star

She was having trouble with her depression after some changes to her medication. But Luk felt none of the psychiatrists — she recounted meeting over 10 — could fully understand why she was feeling this way.

"I could not use my mother tongue to tell the psychiatrist the deepest part of my mind," said Luk, whose first language is Cantonese.

There was also a cultural barrier, she said. Luk is completely blind, and believes most psychiatrists wouldn't understand how some Chinese people's perceptions of blindness affected her mental health. Luk said she often encountered people in Hong Kong who believed her blindness was due to her parents doing something wrong.

It wasn't until Luk was connected to the University Health Network's Asian Initiative in Mental Health (AIM) program at Toronto Western that she found a psychiatrist who spoke her language and understood the nuances of her culture. UHN oversees Toronto Western in Kensington Market, along with other health-care facilities around the city.

That program was suddenly shut down last month, leaving thousands of Chinese-Canadian and other East Asian patients in the city worried about the future of their care.

"It was so fruitful," Luk said of AIM. "After that I got discharged because some symptoms had gone from the prescriptions and the way that they treated me."

Since her initial discharge, Luk would visit the AIM clinic at Toronto Western to manage her depression. She was one of thousands of primarily Chinese Canadian patients from as far north as Markham to walk through the clinic's doors each year for culturally appropriate care in their mother tongue.

But last month, UHN suddenly closed the clinic, allegedly without notice to patients or clinical staff.

UHN confirmed the AIM program had shuttered, its services being integrated into the organization's Outpatient Mental Health and Addictions Services (OMHAS), but said patients were "supported throughout the transition."

"All services continued, and no patients were left without support," an emailed statement from the organization read.

Luk said she found out about the closure through her psychiatrist, and that while she was told she could still go to OMHAS for care, she believed she wouldn't get "the most appropriate service" based on past interactions with general care psychiatrists.

She also said her psychiatrist told her that those who lived north of Eglinton, outside of UHN's catchment area, would not be able to continue getting care through OMHAS, although UHN said in its emailed statement that these patients would.

Meanwhile, a member of the program's team familiar with the closure but not authorized to speak publicly said staff were told of the news on the morning of the closing. Four of the seven clinical staff, the former staffer said, were immediately laid off while the remaining three were moved to the general outpatient mental health service. The program also had two psychiatrists, who were also moved to the general outpatient service, the former staffer said.

Although UHN confirmed there was “a limited consolidation of roles,” it said patients now had access to six additional psychiatrists through OMHAS, along with the professionals formerly part of AIM.

Founded in 2002, the AIM program offered psychiatric and psychotherapy services in Cantonese and Mandarin to around 4,500 patients each year.

According to Luk and others, it was the only program in Toronto offering a “one-stop shop” for patients looking to get prescribed medications for their mental health, as well as do individual and group therapy in a language familiar to them. While most patients were Chinese, those of Cambodian, Vietnamese and other East Asian descents also relied on the clinic.

The clinic was modelled after UHN mental health clinics specifically for Portuguese and Spanish speakers — although [these specialty services were also shuttered](#) in recent years as part of a reorganization.

“I’m not sure why the UHN had decided to close it,” said Luk. “They had neglected the unique cultural and language barriers of those people who are East Asian.”

In its emailed statement, UHN said it recognizes the importance of “culturally and linguistically appropriate care” and that these services remain available through OMHAS.

“We remain committed to supporting the Chinese community through both in-house services and ongoing partnerships with community organizations,” the organization said.

Still, leaders and medical professionals from Toronto’s Chinese-Canadian community worried the loss of the AIM program will lead to patients falling through the cracks.

Dr. Ted Lo, a Toronto psychiatrist, noted that many Chinese Canadians and other racialized groups struggle with mental health challenges due to many being immigrants or dealing with racism.

“And yet it is also harder for them to get help,” he said, pointing to language barriers and existing stigmas around mental health among these racialized groups as challenges patients need to overcome.

The psychiatrist also said there is “quite a lot of neglect from the mainstream services” — a perception that Amy Go, president of the Chinese Canadian National Council of Social Justice, said is fuelled by past experiences with the health system that left Chinese Canadians feeling unheard or not cared for.

“For mental health patients, feeling safe is critical,” said Go. “And so a program like AIM is to provide that trust.”