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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release  
2016HLTH0027-000590  
April 18, 2016

Ministry of Health  
Northern Health  
Provincial Health Services Authority  
BC Cancer Foundation  
University of Northern British Columbia  
First Nations Health Authority  
Genome BC

### **Cutting-edge health care launches in the North**

PRINCE GEORGE – The North today welcomed an innovative project that will improve access for British Columbia’s northern population to participate in, and reap the benefits of, clinical research that will improve disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment in specific communities.

The Northern Biobank Initiative Phase 2 is the first biobank of its kind in British Columbia. It will enable Northern B.C. to better contribute to large-scale provincial and national research by helping to understand the demographic and genetic makeup of different populations throughout the province.

A biobank is a collection of biological samples, such as blood and tissue. These samples, along with associated health information, are collected with donor consent under stringent ethical guidelines. Biobanks are often located in large research hospitals in metropolitan cities and the population demographics they capture, therefore, differ greatly from northern, rural First Nations and Aboriginal communities. The Northern Biobank will be critical to understanding the nuances of these distinct populations to better develop health programs and improve health outcomes.

Led by Dr. Nadine Caron – associate professor, UBC department of surgery, affiliate University of Northern British Columbia faculty member with the northern medical program – this project is part of Genome British Columbia’s User Partner Program and funded by Genome British Columbia, Northern Health Authority, the First Nations Health Authority, Provincial Health Services Authority and the BC Cancer Foundation. The project totals \$1.25 million with each partner group contributing \$250,000. The University of Northern British Columbia is the lead academic institution managing the research administration for the project. The BC Cancer Foundation has fully funded the first phase of the biobank project.

Northern Biobank Initiative Phase 2 will make it easier for local patients to choose to participate in research that is taking place across B.C. and Canada. Initial areas of focus will likely include colorectal, breast and thyroid cancer with the capability to add other complex diseases. The Northern Biobank initiative will be able to work together with other large-scale biospecimen collections in B.C. and across Canada.

Advances in technology lead to much more precise, personalized and effective health care.

Through the #BCTECH Strategy and support for organizations like Genome BC, the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research, the BC Cancer Foundation, the Provincial Health Services Authority, Northern Health, the First Nations Health Authority and BC Cancer Agency, the Province continues to attract and retain talented researchers to work in B.C. to help improve care for patients and save lives.

**Quotes:**

**Health Minister Terry Lake –**

“As we move forward with our comprehensive technology strategy, it’s clear that British Columbians continue to learn and benefit from research going on in their home communities. And now, the North has an opportunity to learn from on-the-ground work being conducted to identify health impacts over the long term.”

**Shirley Bond, MLA for Prince George-Valemount –**

“The Northern Biobank Initiative once again highlights the exceptionally talented health-care professionals we have in Northern B.C. Dr. Nadine Caron will lead this innovative project. The Northern Biobank is the first of its kind in B.C. and will allow us to better understand and develop effective health-care programs for our residents and region.”

**Mike Morris, MLA for Prince George-Mackenzie –**

“The Northern Biobank initiative illustrates research funding and local expertise fuelling enhanced access to research innovation. We’re proud to see this project attract so many important partners committed to improving the health of Northern B.C. residents.”

**Dr. Nadine Caron, associate professor, UBC department of surgery, affiliate University of Northern British Columbia faculty member with the northern medical program –**

“Having a local biobank means that people of the North can keep pace with and benefit from the rapid advances being made in precision medicine. This project will allow us to optimize our understanding of our northern and Aboriginal patient populations and inform the approaches best suited for our community. It will also better enable this community to contribute to large-scale research happening across the province and nationally.”

**Dr. John Spinelli, scientist, department head for cancer control and acting vice-president for population oncology, BC Cancer Agency, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority –**

“Making participation in research available to all British Columbians is very important. The Northern Biobank initiative is a step in the right direction toward building the infrastructure needed for the collection of cancer samples and data in Northern British Columbian communities. We are hopeful that it will, ultimately, help scientists and clinicians better understand and serve the cancer needs of all British Columbians.”

**Joe Gallagher, CEO, First Nations Health Authority –**

“As a wellness partner to First Nations in B.C., we are committed to ensuring that our populations can benefit from the same lifesaving advancements in personalized medicine that

will be enjoyed by other Canadians. Northern First Nations in B.C. will be the first Indigenous people in Canada to determine for themselves a culturally safe framework for involvement in this fast-evolving field.”

**Dr. Alan E. Winter, president and CEO, Genome BC –**

“Genomics is revolutionizing health care and our goal is for all British Columbians to benefit from these advances. We’re proud to partner on a project that enables our rural and Indigenous communities to gain better insights into the distinct complexities of disease and guide the best management.”

**Sarah Roth, president and CEO, BC Cancer Foundation –**

“With the incredible support of our donors and Ride to Conquer Cancer teams like the Wheelin’ Warriors of the North, we are proud to help advance the Northern Biobank Initiative.”

**Cathy Ulrich, president and CEO, Northern Health –**

“Research is integral to improving health-care services. Moving to Phase 2 of the Northern Biobank process is another step toward enabling research in the North, for the North. We are excited to be a partner in this project.”

**Dr. Daniel Weeks, president, UNBC –**

“The future research generated through this ongoing project will have a unique and lasting impact on the health of residents in Northern B.C. and beyond. Through this new biobank, Dr. Caron, together with fellow researchers, will be able to pursue leading research into the prevention and treatment of diseases prevalent in Northern populations and environments.”

**Learn more:**

For more information about the #BCTECH strategy: [www.bctechstrategy.ca](http://www.bctechstrategy.ca)

Visit Genome BC for more information: [www.genomebc.ca](http://www.genomebc.ca)

First Nations Health Authority: [www.fnha.ca](http://www.fnha.ca)

Learn more about cancer in British Columbia from the BC Cancer Agency: [www.bccancer.bc.ca](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca)

BC Cancer Foundation: [www.bccancerfoundation.com](http://www.bccancerfoundation.com)

The Provincial Health Services Authority provides provincewide specialty health services through its agencies, services and programs: [www.phsa.ca](http://www.phsa.ca)

Learn more about research at the University of Northern British Columbia: [unbc.ca/research](http://unbc.ca/research)

Northern Health: <https://northernhealth.ca>

A backgrounder follows.

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## BACKGROUND

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### **Why a biobank for the North?**

#### **In British Columbia:**

- 40% of the Vancouver census metropolitan area's population have immigrated to Canada, compared to Northern B.C., which has an immigrant population of less than 10%.
- 37% of Northern Health is rural and at least 18% are Aboriginal, while Vancouver Coastal Health records 8% rural and 2.4% Aboriginal, respectively.

#### **The objectives of the Northern Biobank Initiative Phase 2 include:**

- Training, software development and other foundational aspects;
- Establishing a retrospective breast cancer biobank (2004-2014): researchers are able to select from biospecimens and data that have already been contributed to a biobank to answer a research question;
- Directing the implementation and governance of the Northern Biobank Initiative, based on broad consultation with stakeholders, including the potential for a first of its kind separate First Nations sub-biobank, and;
- Supporting other research projects to determine the molecular basis of different cancers in the unique genetic traits and unique environmental factors in this population, and the results will feed back into better patient care.

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