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NHCC 2021 Change-Maker award winner took on racism in health care experienced by injured brother

Toronto ON – May 18, 2022: Neurological Health Charities Canada has awarded its Change-Maker Award to a young woman, who in advocating for her injured brother, took on inequities and racism in health care that stood in the way of getting the care he needed for a traumatic brain injury and then used this experience to drive greater change in the health-care system.

Receiving the 2021 NHCC Change-Maker Award for an outstanding individual is Samira Omar of Toronto. Ms. Omar's activism was born out of her lived experience as a caregiver for her brother.

As the eldest daughter of immigrant parents, Samira felt it was her responsibility to advocate and communicate on behalf of her brother. She spent 18 hours a day at the hospital for weeks fighting for his right to live and to have vital rehabilitation care.

Once her brother received the care he needed, Ms. Omar decided to further her own academic training through a PhD in rehabilitation science delving deeper into how she could mitigate the structural and institutional factors that prevent young Black people with traumatic brain injury from receiving the care they need.

In 2018, Ms. Omar entered the PhD program at the University of Toronto Rehabilitation Sciences Institute and quickly became a leader on promoting equity and inclusion in the rehabilitation sector. Her advocacy has resulted in changes to the curriculum to reflect equity, diversity, and inclusion. Looking to attract younger people to the field, she has been a lead organizer for a summer mentorship program to introduce Black and Indigenous high school students to rehabilitation professions at the University of Toronto.

She is also generating research that has direct implications for clinical practice. For example, her research focuses on Black people experiencing traumatic brain injury and their formal and informal caregivers in Canada. She is already contributing to scholarly knowledge with the first review on the experience of being Black with a brain injury, which exposed structural racism in care pathways across professions.

"I do not know of any other person with lived experience of neurological disability who has addressed anti-Black racism in such a profound way both through advocacy and science. She has been incredibly generous with her time to illuminate others with her insights that are so badly needed at this time," said Dr. Angela Colantonio, Professor, Rehabilitation Sciences Institute, University of Toronto.

"In the western world, others might consider her as a caregiver but she sees herself as just a sister who just had to do everything in her power to advocate for her brother and make sure that he and others like him don't fall through the cracks in

health care,” said Michelle McDonald, National Executive Director, Brain Injury Canada.

1.5 million Canadians live with acquired brain injury and it impacts every aspect of a person life, including their family. Brain injury is also intersectional, meaning it contributes to and is affected by personal circumstances and systemic barriers. The invisible nature of brain injury, the lack of appropriate services & supports, and lack of awareness create even more barriers.

The NHCC Change-Maker Award recognizes individuals or organizations that have made a meaningful difference in improving the quality of life for Canadians living with brain conditions. NHCC is a coalition of organizations that represent millions of Canadians living with brain diseases, disorders and injuries (brain conditions) that affect mobility and dexterity, while impairing memory and the ability to think. See more information at: www.mybrainmatters.ca or www.moncerveaumavie.ca.

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