RESEARCH SUMMARY:

Facing the Challenge of Rheumatoid Arthritis

Dr. Louise Perlin looks for solutions that treat the whole person.

Rheumatoid arthritis affects over 335,000 people or one percent of the Canadian population. A chronic, systemic autoimmune disorder, it most commonly causes inflammation and tissue damage in joints and tendons and it can affect other organs as well. It can be disabling and painful, diminishing quality of life because it restricts functioning and mobility.

An expert clinician, who has been with St. Michael’s for 12 years, Dr. Louise Perlin believes that her patients who suffer from this debilitating condition are among “the most positive and most courageous.” She sees her practice as a continuing dialogue with her patients about the most effective treatments. “There are about 100 rheumatic diseases, and rheumatoid arthritis, a complex multi-system disease, is the most common of the inflammatory arthritic conditions” she says. “Every patient I see is unique and requires an individual treatment plan.” She says that for these patients, care is always “in process.”

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to helping people with rheumatoid arthritis is not knowing what triggers the disease. Researchers and clinicians know more about the pathways of inflammation that set up the disease, but are still looking for causes.

Despite the challenges of dealing with a disease for which there are no definitive diagnostic tests, Dr. Perlin is optimistic about emerging treatment options. “There have been some exciting advances, as we have begun to understand the mechanisms and the genetics of the disease better. During my own career, we have gone from having a small number of agents to having a wide range of tools, including newer drugs that control the disease much better so that patients can live as normally as possible.”

Besides the work with her patients, what also sustains Dr. Perlin is her interest in education and helping young health care professionals understand the complexities of her specialty. Dr. Perlin’s outstanding teaching skills have been recognized with awards given by students and residents from the University of Toronto and her peers in St. Michael’s Hospital’s Department of Medicine. In addition, she received the 2005 St. Michael’s Hospital “Values in Action” Award for Compassion, a clear indication that for Dr. Louise Perlin it is the people who matter most.