

## NEWS RELEASE

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### Deputy Minister University Champion for PCU-WHS Visits the Campus for the First Time



*Jody Thomas, Deputy Minister University Champion for PCU-WHS, was welcomed by all three levels of government when she paid her first visit to the University on July 6. From left to right: Port Alberni Mayor Mike Ruttan, MP Gord Johns, Ms. Thomas, Wolfgang Zimmermann, President of PCU-WHS, and MLA Scott Fraser.*

“This is the future. You are truly on the cutting edge... and here it is in Port Alberni, BC.”

Jody Thomas, Deputy Minister University Champion for Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences (PCU-WHS) made this assertion following her visit to the University on July 6. Ms. Thomas, who was appointed University Champion a year ago by the Government of Canada, is currently Senior Associate Deputy Minister of the Department of National Defence. Prior to her appointment to this position in March 2017, she was the Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard.

As Deputy Minister University Champion, Ms. Thomas’ role is to provide a valuable link between the federal government and PCU-WHS: identifying shared priorities, aligning university research and curricula with federal public service priorities, promoting and facilitating exchanges on public policies and programs, and building awareness of career opportunities in the federal public service.

While she has had many conversations over the last 12 months with PCU-WHS President, Wolfgang Zimmermann, and the University’s Chancellor, the Honourable Wayne Wouters, this was the first opportunity Ms. Thomas has had to tour the facility and meet the staff. Also on hand to meet Ms. Thomas were representatives of all three levels of government for the area: Port Alberni Mayor Mike Ruttan, Member of the Legislative Assembly Scott Fraser, and Member of Parliament Gord Johns.

All four of the special guests participated in a presentation by members of the PCU-WHS faculty and staff regarding current and planned programs, including an online presentation, direct from Dublin, Ireland, by the University's interim Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Donal McAnaney.

"Before coming today, it was hard for me to visualize what this is all about. Seeing the curriculum and having the discussion about what you are doing and what the vision is, made it all very concrete. Unlike a traditional bricks and mortar university, an "online" university ensures access to everybody. You are living what you are teaching," Ms. Thomas enthused.

As a senior member of the Department of National Defence, Ms. Thomas saw immediately how she could promote disability management and PCU-WHS within the federal government. "I believe that disability management is the next big thing to hit the federal government with its aging workforce. Disability management issues come up daily whether it is accommodating someone who has been injured on or off the job, someone with a mental health challenge, or someone with a disability who is entering the workplace. Currently we do it with varying degrees of success."

"Understanding what disability management is, knowing how to manage someone's progressive return to work after an illness or injury in a healthy and respectful manner, understanding the legal implications and the socio-economic and psychological impacts, requires a different skill set than what has traditionally been the case for professionals in human resources. Understanding that this is a stream of work and line of professional accreditation which is unique is a big step forward. It is not a skill set we have developed in the federal government. Educating human resource professionals to assist line managers is vital," she says.

Ms. Thomas described a couple of ways the government and PCU-WHS could benefit from a reciprocal relationship. "The federal government sends people to get degrees and advance their education all the time. I can help ensure this University is part of that decision set. The Advanced Certificate in Return to Work is perfect for a working professional. I think the Masters in Disability Management and the Integrated Workplace Health degree now under consideration will fill a real need for the workplace."

"Another mutual benefit is that you have students looking for work-terms and co-op placements, and graduates looking for either entrance into the workforce or career changes. There are quite a few opportunities with the federal government that will be looking for this expertise."

Ms. Thomas explained that she knew first hand how critical it is to support people with disabilities maintain meaningful work. "My older sister had cerebral palsy and worked for the Department of Defence. The ability to work and have a workplace willing to accommodate her was life-changing. It doesn't matter what your disability is, nobody wants to be patronized. People don't want to be taken care of, they want to contribute."

In wrapping up, Wolfgang Zimmermann, President of PCU-WHS, said they were indeed blessed to have Jody Thomas, with her keen insight and personal resolve, supporting the University as its Champion. "She will be able to play a pivotal role helping us achieve our vision going forward."