Five Queen's University students have been honoured with Vanier Scholarships.

The prestigious award is designed to attract and retain world-class doctoral students who demonstrate high levels of achievement and leadership.

It entitles honourees $50,000 each year for three years, giving them the freedom to pursue and complete doctoral studies that will contribute to global knowledge.

Brockville native Emma Dargie is one of the students who received the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

The 25-year-old is researching vulvodynia, a chronic vulvar pain that impacts millions of women. This type of pain occurs in the genital region and is severe for many of these women, interfering with quality of life, mental health, relationships and the ability to work.

Dargie began conducting phone screenings with women experiencing vulvar pain during her second year of undergraduate studies with Dr. Caroline Pukall.

"I got a chance to learn just how much this pain impacts their lives, and how little is actually known about it in the greater medical community," said Dargie.

Dargie said while there is a select group of researchers working towards better forms of diagnosis and treatment, on the whole, it's a very unknown condition.

"They [the women screened] expressed so much frustration because they were told it was all in their heads, and that they should just have a glass of wine and it would all be better," said Dargie. "If it was once or twice, I would just chalk this up to randomness, but I have heard this so many times from so many women that this sort of thing was sort of pushed under the rug."

Dargie said there seems to be a general assumption that the pain is psychological.

"With the vast majority of women that's not the case," explained Dargie. "It's an actual legitimate pain disorder, and we're working very hard to change that opinion in the general medical literature."
Dargie spent her Canada Day long weekend doing preliminary research, demonstrating just how passionate she is about helping women who are experiencing this type of pain.

“I feel like this is actually going to make a real difference,” said Dargie. “Sometimes when you do research, you wonder what the end product is going to be, but because I’m making the end product a key component of my research, I feel like there is going to be a greater chance of impacting more women.”

She said it’s very important that chronic vulvar pain begin to be treated as a pain condition.

“When you go about treating any sort of problem, it’s important to be able to figure out what the best ways of treating it will be,” said Dargie. “If you’re thinking about something as a psychological problem, you’re going to use methods that are very different than if you think about something as a pain condition.”

Dargie said that if the problem is looked at as a pain condition, it’s easier to address psychotherapy at the same time.

“This approach allows us to get a more holistic picture of what this woman is experiencing and the different ways that we might be able to intervene in order to improve their pain and their quality of life,” said Dargie.

Each year, there are between 150 to 160 students honoured with the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

The program helps Canadian universities attract doctoral students from across the country and around the world, with many staying on to become academics and professionals in Canada.

“A Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship is the most prestigious award that Canada can give to a doctoral candidate,” said Brent Herbert-Copley, vice president of research capacity with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, in an email to Kingston This Week. “It gives doctoral candidates the freedom and support they need to undertake outstanding research and become the next generation of leaders across all sectors of society.”

Along with Dargie, fellow Queen’s students Jay Jantz, Yingli Rao, Shane McIntosh and Kerri Froc were also awarded Vanier Scholarships.

Jantz is researching how key brain regions interact to control behaviour, and how these regions can be targeted to improve the lives of those suffering from Parkinson’s disease with treatment.

Rao will be researching new strategies and materials that could reduce energy consumption. “As an international student, I feel enormously fortunate and grateful to be able to receive such an honour from Canada,” said Rao in a press release. “The Vanier award relieved all my financial stress. I could completely focus on my research. I am able to attend international conferences, and learn from different accomplished scholars in related research areas. The Vanier award could greatly broaden my research view and enlighten the way I do my research.”

McIntosh is investigating methods for reducing software development overhead generated by the maintenance of the build system. This system is one of the most important tools used during software development.

Froc’s research hopes to develop a new tool to ensure women’s equal access to constitutional rights, guaranteeing rights and freedoms equally to men and women.

Meanwhile, Dargie is unsure what her next steps will be upon completing the three years of research.

She isn’t certain if she will end up in academia, doing research full time as a professor or if she will work at a hospital. She could also become a consultant or a full-time clinician.

“There are so many ways to go,” said Dargie. “I think I will see what continues to make me feel as passionate as I’m feeling right now, and something that benefits the most people."Read the article on Kingstonthisweek.com