

Media Release



Patient navigators help improve the cancer journey for patients and families Health Minister applauds program on World Cancer Day

Feb 4, 2015 – Alberta cancer patients and their families are reporting an improved experience with the health care system since the launch of a provincewide patient navigation program.

Patient and family satisfaction with cancer services has increased by 15 per cent since the Alberta Cancer Foundation's Patient Navigator Program was rolled out three years ago to all 15 community cancer centres outside of Calgary and Edmonton, according to a recent evaluation of the initiative.

During that time, more than 5,000 Albertans have been supported by about 15 patient navigators – registered nurses who work closely with cancer patients, families and other health-care professionals to co-ordinate care.

Patient navigators explain treatment choices and test results, and assist with the physical, practical and emotional challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis.

"Reducing the care challenges that cancer patients face is part of the vision of Changing our Future: Alberta's Cancer Plan to 2030," says Stephen Mandel, Minister of Health. "The Alberta Cancer Foundation Patient Navigator Program is an excellent example of the progress we have made on this initiative. I would like to thank Alberta's patient navigators for supporting cancer patients and ensuring they don't have to face cancer alone."

Patients and families who have used the program have reported that navigators contributed to a sense of stability and security; ensured timely access to information required for decision-making; co-ordinated additional supports in their communities; and offered individualized care to meet specific areas of need.

The Alberta Cancer Foundation contributed \$1.8 million between 2012 and 2014 to launch the program, and will contribute an additional \$4.6 million to run the program until 2019.

"Through our patient navigators, we are putting patients first by providing a single point of contact for information and support," says Vickie Kaminski, President and CEO of Alberta Health Services (AHS).

Dr. Linda Watson, Lead of Person Centred Care for AHS, says the program also frees up resources throughout the health system.

"We're finding the Alberta Cancer Foundation Patient Navigator Program is improving the cancer journey for those who live outside of the province's two largest cities because these Albertans now have a dedicated support person in or near their community to help them with their specific cancer care needs," says Dr. Watson.

"Going to your family doctor or the emergency department for cancer-related questions and needs is not always the best use of health resources. Introducing patient navigators early in the cancer journey can actually help change the way patients use the system. Navigators can sometimes prevent the need for a physician visit or trip to the emergency room."



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According to the recent program evaluation, the proportion of patients who visited an emergency department for cancer-related symptoms dropped from 22 per cent pre-navigation to 15 per cent post-navigation. Similarly, the proportion of patients who reported hospital stays for symptom management after the introduction of the navigator role was cut by more than half, dropping from 14 per cent pre-navigation to six per cent post-navigation.

Typically, patients and family members contact a patient navigator between one and five times from cancer diagnosis through to treatment and followup.

Jessica Franks calls the Patient Navigator Program “one of the smartest things to be introduced to the health-care system.”

Franks says the program provided invaluable support to her and her mother, Carol, who was diagnosed with an aggressive form of ovarian cancer last year. The Barrhead resident died last December.

“We knew nothing about cancer before and this was a traumatic, frightening time for us,” says Jessica. “Our navigator was such a comfort for us. No matter what we asked – from family counselling to home care needs to recovering from surgery – our navigator was a soothing source of help. I can’t imagine what that time would have been like without her by our side.”

Stories like this affirm the need for cancer patient navigators, says Alberta Cancer Foundation CEO Myka Osinchuk. “We are happy to provide this support to Albertans facing cancer no matter where they live,” she says. “This program is improving patient care and health system efficiency.”

About 16,000 Albertans were diagnosed with cancer in 2012 and current projections show that number will increase to more than 24,000 by 2030.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

The Alberta Cancer Foundation makes life better for Albertans facing cancer. We stand alongside every Albertan who hears the words “you have cancer” and offer three in return “we will help.”

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