

Family practice nursing on the rise in Nova Scotia

RNs trained to meet needs of patients across the life span

By TANYA MAGEE, RN; CORINNE HODDER-MALLOY, RN; DEE MASON

problem solve

- Take action and live a healthy life

Over the past year, a youth self-management program has been developed at the IWK Health Centre and the province is working to identify First Nations partners to support access to culturally safe self-management programs for Mi'kmaw.

A pilot project will be launched in all district health authorities this fall to increase awareness and understanding of self-management programs by health-care professionals. It will be available to all health-care providers through a variety of sessions, including the Building a Better Tomorrow Together program.

With more health-care professionals aware of self-management strategies, patients are expected to be better supported to participate in the care planning process. This will reduce the demand for care provider interventions and decrease the development of secondary chronic diseases.

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The number of family physicians in Nova Scotia hiring family practice nurses to work in fee-for-service practices is steadily increasing, thanks to support for new collaborative teams.

The Family Practice Nursing Program, provided through the Registered Nurses Professional Development Center (RNPDC), trains RNs for the needs of patients and families across the life span in primary care settings.

"Patients in my practice have noted this care feels different," said Dr. Ajantha Jayabarathan, a family physician in Halifax.

Dr. Jayabarathan said she and her family practice nurse Terry MacEachern communicate regularly to develop motivational behavior approaches that are grounded in common sense to help guide people toward healthy goals.

She said patients and families are reaping benefits from this practice model, with shorter waits for regular and urgent appointments as well as additional time for education, guidance, counseling and lifestyle modification.

Family practice nursing as a career choice has been welcomed by registered nurses. The training program streamlines content and experience with a mentoring component and skill acquisition exercises.

"Having spent 20 plus years in a hospital

setting, the change was a big step. However, I haven't looked back," said RN Terry MacEachern.

She said she enjoys working with all age groups to teach about health and how to improve it.

"Following a woman through her pregnancy and then caring for the new mother and newborn is a degree of continuity of care I experienced first-hand in family practice nursing. Having opportunities for new learning and then sharing knowledge with clients is very rewarding," said Ms. MacEachern.

"I can't help but feel that this type of nursing is truly making a difference in people's health. This is what nursing is about," she added.

Dr. Jayabarathan said the availability of two health practitioners to collaboratively manage needs of patients and their families is cost-effective, time sensitive, and more person-centred. Sharing tasks, impressions, and follow-up reduces the risk of overlooking issues and enhances preventive and chronic disease care.

Solo practitioners are also enjoying greater work/life satisfaction along with peer support.

"Over the last two years, Terry and I have developed new approaches for our 1,200 patients such as systematic use of Framingham cardiovascular risk scoring measures to guide

behavior change and reduce risk of coronary artery disease," said Dr. Jayabarathan.

She said they also meet with other practitioners and learn through case-based discussion to enhance their skills.

"Patients and their families have appreciated the reassurance of the follow up and continuity that we are now consistently providing," she said.

This practice model can be supported in fee-for-service models of family practice. More information is under the Canadian Nurses Association's Primary Care Toolkit - The Business Case for Primary Care. Visit www.cna-nurses.ca/CNA/practice/family/business/default_e.aspx

Family practice nurses have access to mentors, peer support, and continuing professional activities as part of this program. Visit www.cna-nurses.ca/CNA/practice/family/communication/default_e.aspx

The primary care department of each district health authority of Nova Scotia is responsible for the recruiting of collaborative teams and each has its own manager.

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Terry MacEachern
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