

Boy, How We've Grown!

A Reflective Look at the Patient and Community Engagement Research (PaCER) Program

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Six years ago I answered an advertisement calling for patients with arthritis to join a pilot program focused on teaching patients to engage in peer-to-peer health research and become involved in the newly formed Strategic Clinical Networks™ (SCNs). That pilot has evolved into what is now called PaCER and today, as a group, in addition to our ongoing work, PaCERs have completed 20 contract projects in partnership with seven SCNs and other organizations as diverse as the *Arthritis Society*, *Choosing Wisely Alberta* and the *Libin Institute*. Patient researchers have had ten peer-reviewed articles accepted for publication in various journals and we are now a University of Calgary Certificate Program.



PaCER Mentors and Interns, June 2018 Workshop, Calgary
Photo courtesy of PaCER

The biggest change came this year as we moved from a classroom-based teaching program to a distance, online format in collaboration with the University of Calgary's Continuing Education Department. We have students stretching from the far north to the deep south of Alberta and we have a team of two students working thousands of miles apart, one in Vancouver and the other in Ontario.

The second big step we took this year was to partner with the Population, Public, and Indigenous Health SCN in a project to form four Indigenous student teams so that our peer-to-peer research education would expand from patient to patient research into culturally



appropriate Indigenous patient to Indigenous patient research. These four teams are in addition to three teams partnered with and supported by SCNs in our original format of focusing on an aspect of a particular disease concern. We have two urban Indigenous teams - one in Calgary and the other in Edmonton - and two teams living and researching within Indigenous communities - one in Northern Alberta and one in the South. All four teams are focused on researching aspects of the prevention and early detection of cancer, an emerging major health concern for Indigenous people.

When I joined the pilot program I believed I was going to be engaged in learning for a year and then move into the membership of an SCN as a volunteer. Six years later I have led several contract projects as a paid researcher, am currently involved in an exciting research project, and am mentoring two Indigenous teams. I have moved from being part of an experiment in patient led health research to a member of a busy, expanding organization involved in patient engagement research and long distance education. You never know where dreams and perseverance can lead you.