

Dementia Workshop Supports Public Awareness

Primary Health Care Integrated Geriatric Services Initiative

Barb Hawken's eyes were opened to the challenges of living with dementia when she and her dozen colleagues enrolled in dementia simulation education offered by the Provost Primary Care Network (PCN).

"It's awesome," enthuses Barb, pharmacy manager of the I.D.A. Drug Store in Provost. "Everyone should try it."

The workshop lets participants experience 'virtual dementia'. They wear nubby gloves, one of which is inside out; a headset that muffles sound and plays indistinct background noises; shoes that have uncomfortable nubs inside of them; and blurry, tunnel-vision goggles. Then they enter a strange room one at a time for about 20 minutes. They are told to complete a series of five tasks—like hanging clothing, folding socks and putting dishes away.

"You really can't hear very well and by the time I focused, I'd missed the first two things. And you don't know where things are in this strange room," Barb recalls. "That's exactly what happens with people living with dementia."

Drugstore staff, already sensitive to clients with cognitive challenges, are now more aware of how they need to communicate with people living with dementia.

"We need to take our time with them," says Barb. "We talk slower, and give them an extra minute to process their environment before they have to do anything."

Public awareness complements exemplary elder care

About 16 per cent of the 2,000 residents in Provost are over 65 years of age. Because the town is so small, it offers a unique opportunity for collaboration on dementia care.

'All of the physicians work out of one clinic, so they see each other daily. The team meets at the seniors' lodge where we assess the person living in the lodge as a whole,' explains Sherilea Scheidt, Registered Nurse lead in Provost. "Dr Erasmus initiated this collaborative approach which has resulted in building trusting relationships among providers, recipients and the community." By providing the right supports to seniors, including those living with dementia, they can continue to live in their community.

"People living with dementia function very well in their home," Sherilea explains. "It's when they are out of their element that the chaos starts."



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To complement this exemplary elder care, Provost PCN turned its attention to educating the community about dementia.

The PCN received support from the Primary Health Care Integrated Geriatric Services Initiative (PHC IGSI), a provincial initiative that supports local primary health care teams in advancing priorities aimed at improving supports for those living in their community with cognitive impairment or dementia.

“PHC IGSI helped us to bring dementia education to Provost,” Sherilea says. They recommended Phyllis Slimmon, geriatric mental health nurse with Alberta Health Services, who has conducted the simulated dementia education in other communities.

It takes a village

“Sherilea is trying to develop a dementia friendly community, so we started by letting people feel what it is like to have dementia,” Phyllis explains.

The Provost PCN started the workshops in the fall of 2019. So far, municipal agencies, healthcare staff, drugstore staff and a business downtown have either signed up or participated. Next to sign up are the fire department and the police department.

“This is grassroots education,” Phyllis says. “We need people to understand dementia, so we can support people living with it and their caregivers, right in the community.” She adds “It takes a community to support people living with dementia.”

Partners

- Provost Primary Care Network
- Alberta Health Services
- IDA Pharmacist
- Local businesses