

It takes a team to tackle health ailments

Two-thirds of Albertans are plugged in to Primary Care Networks

CHRIS ZDEB
Journal Health Writer
EDMONTON

For 20 years, Keith Denman thought about how much healthier he'd be if he lost some weight. He was being treated for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, but figured he was basically all right, until his last physical when he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes.

"It was kind of like a brick to the head that ... I had eaten myself into some real problems, and it was time to get serious, because not a lot of stuff gets better after (age) 50."

His family doctor, Grant Campbell, put the 52-year-old Denman on medication, then sent him to Bev Galley, a chronic disease management nurse.

Galley encouraged Denman to keep a journal and write down everything he ate. She gave him practical information about exercise and eating properly. By measuring his portion sizes, for example, he found he was eating almost three times the recommended amount of cereal at breakfast. She talked to him about his health goals, then sent him to registered dietitian Carissa Brown. Brown tweaked his diet before

sending Denman on to kinesiologist Lisa Workman, who told him how to get the most benefit from walking his golden retriever, Wally, and exercising at home.

A year later, Denman is 45 pounds lighter, his cholesterol and blood pressure numbers are good, but more importantly, he says, it's easier for him to stand up after sleeping on the ground while camping.

Denman credits much of this success to the Edmonton Oliver Primary Care Network—or PCN—where he can visit his doctor and all his other health-care providers together under one roof.

The Edmonton Oliver PCN is made up of 50 to 60 family doctors from the Allin Clinic, Links Clinic and Royal Alexandra Hospital, who joined together to create a team approach to primary health care. It's one of 33 PCNs in Alberta, which care for 2.2 million or 66 per cent of Albertans.

The first PCN opened in Edmonton five years ago (there are now four in the capital). The province's goal is to care for 80 per cent of the population this way. PCNs are Alberta's way of dealing with the ongoing shortage of doctors that has 20 to 25 per cent of Albertans without a family physician, explains Campbell.

Pulling in allied health professionals to help patients with things like exercise, diet and the management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, COPD, asthma, hypertension and mental health, allows family doctors to see more patients, says Campbell, who cares for 2,500.

"There's nothing like it anywhere," says Colleen Enns, general manager of the Edmonton Oliver PCN. "Alberta is leading the way across Canada and across North America."

By referring Denman to other professionals for help with lifestyle changes, Campbell says he only needs to see his patient once every six months instead of once a month, freeing up appointments for other patients. "I'm a family doctor and I can't do this by myself. This group does it very well."

Besides registered nurses, registered dietitians and kinesiologists, PCN doctors also team up with social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and pharmacists. Patients who are successful in dealing with chronic health problems this way reduce the demand on the acute health care system. A number of studies have found that every dollar spent on primary care saves \$7 in acute or hospital care, says Enns.



CHRIS SCHWARZ, THE JOURNAL

Keith Denman, foreground, has his diabetes under control and is living better, thanks to a team of specialists including, from left: kinesiologist Lisa Workman, chronic disease management nurse Bev Galley, registered dietitian Carissa Brown, and Dr. Grant Campbell, all part of a Primary Care Network.

Campbell calls Denman "a model diabetic." By taking his medication as prescribed, following the recommendations of the health-care team, and hitting his target numbers, Denman has lowered his cardiovascular risk by 70 to 80 per cent.

But Denman isn't finished yet. Ideally, he'd like to lose another 45

pounds. "I would love to live long enough to embarrass my children more than I already do, to spend their inheritance, and to get my money's worth out of the pension plan," he says, laughing. "Life is good. I want to enjoy it as long as I can."

czdeb@thejournal.canwest.com