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Family Ties

South East Toronto Family Health Team and TEGH - Working together to improve the health of our community

The final report of the Romanow Commission summed it up best: "There is almost universal agreement that primary health care offers tremendous potential benefits to Canadians and to the health care system ... no other initiative holds as much potential for improving health and sustaining our health care system."

Primary health care is the patient's first point of contact with a health care provider and is a patient's entry point into the health care system. In Ontario, Family Health Teams (FHTs) have been created and are designed to improve patient access to health care by expanding the number and variety of Interprofessional health care providers (IPPs) available to individual patients and families. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is investing heavily in community-based health care, especially FHTs, in order to ease the pressure on hospitals and deliver care where people need it most – in the community.

To help support and develop community linkages, South East Toronto Family Health Team (SETFHT) created the Family Health Team Advisory Committee with the mandate to provide input to SETFHT for program and service planning and priority setting related to the primary health care needs of the East York community. One of SETFHT’s biggest partners in reaching its mandate is the Toronto East General Hospital (TEGH). SETFHT has been working closely with TEGH to develop initiatives and priorities that meet the needs of both partners and are of benefit to our community.

This year, TEGH had 30 family medicine residents and 17 of them have the opportunity to work within the interprofessional setting of SETFHT. Robust in health care services and delivery, the health care providers at SETFHT include Nurse Practitioners, Registered Nurses, Registered Dieticians, Pharmacist, Mental Health Addictions Counsellor, Social Workers, Chiropractor and a Care Navigator – each of them bring an area of expertise that collectively brings the highest possible quality of care for the patient. This Interprofessional model of care will be the gold standard for training all health care professionals of the future.
SETFHT’s partnership with TEGH also extends down to the clinical program delivery level. SETFHT recently received a grant from HealthForceOntario’s “Optimizing Use of Health Providers’ Competencies Fund” to develop an Interprofessional Wound Care Team in a Family Health Team (FHT). Much of the success for this initiative will be reliant on SETFHT’s strong relationship with TEGH.

For the last year, TEGH has provided psychiatrists to SETFHT for collaborative care and support for ongoing education of both the primary care providers and students. This shared care model allows for increased collaboration and communication between the FHT and the psychiatrist, which leads to better quality of care for the patient. To further support individuals with mental health issues, SETFHT’s Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor works alongside a family physician in the Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) Homeless initiative to provide counselling and recovery support for the individuals utilizing the services of TEGH’s Withdrawal Management Centre.

In the last year, TEGH worked closely with SETFHT on the Telehomecare Phase One project, a pilot project to support and monitor patients who suffer from congestive heart failure or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease via advanced information communication technologies from their home. Evaluation of the program is underway but it is expected that the outcomes may show: a decrease in visits to the (TEGH) Emergency Department, a decrease in the number of visits to a primary care provider, and will provide evidence that these diseases can be effectively self-managed using Telehomecare technology.

Physical inactivity and obesity are critical health issues in Ontario which can lead to a wide range of health problems and diseases. As a result, SETFHT launched its Healthy Weights Program in the summer of 2008. The first primary health group to partner with Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, patients that enrol in SETFHT’s Healthy Weights Program have an opportunity to work one-on-one with recreation staff to learn how to develop personal strategies to incorporate daily physical activity into their lifestyles. It is hoped that this health promotion intervention will actually lead to disease prevention (especially diabetes).

SETFHT is poised to be a leader in primary care reform with its ongoing development of patient-centric programs and services and ensuring that health care providers continue to practice to their full scope – this will lead to an increase in patient access to primary care services, a more mobilized and engaged patient in self-management of their own health, an increase in patient and provider satisfaction and demonstrated excellence in training health care professionals of the future. With the ongoing support of TEGH, SETFHT will continually work towards reaching its vision of being “a leading academic family health team that improves the health of our community”.

By: Kavita Mehta, Executive Director, SETFHT

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