



Endocrinologist Dr. Adam White and nephrologist Dr. Monica Beaulieu are members of the ICC's multidisciplinary medical team, created to meet the complex needs of kidney patients.

the TEAM Approach



ST. PAUL'S UNIQUE INTEGRATED CARE CLINIC IS STREAMLINING HEALTH CARE FOR PEOPLE COPING WITH THE COMPLEXITIES OF MULTIPLE CHRONIC HEALTH PROBLEMS.

It's said that trouble almost always comes in threes, and that's certainly the case for many people living with kidney disease. For them, chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease are often close companions to renal failure, creating multiple challenges for both patients and their doctors, especially when it comes to delivering medical care. It was precisely this need for co-ordinated services for people with complex health challenges that inspired St. Paul's Hospital to create its Integrated Care Clinic (ICC), the first such clinic of its kind in Canada, which caters specifically to the needs of kidney patients – people like Emily Barker.

POSTER PATIENT

Barker is no stranger to the medical system. Eight-and-a-half pounds at birth, she was the biggest baby in the incubators when she was born prematurely in Ottawa. At age one she developed asthma, and at five she was hit with a triple-whammy: chicken pox, pneumonia and bronchitis. Despite no history of diabetes on either side of her family, Barker was diagnosed with Type 1 (juvenile) diabetes at age six.

"I've had a whole sludge of medical issues from the get-go," says the affable 23-year-old student.

At age 13, Barker and her family moved to Calgary, where she experienced another blow to her health: renal failure.

Barker has other health problems, too, including low blood pressure and anemia. However, she refuses to adopt a woe-is-me mentality and says she's blessed in many other ways. She will admit, though, that she's found herself overwhelmed and even frustrated by the health-care system. It was hard for her to find a family doctor in Alberta, and, given her

various needs, she's had more doctors' appointments, lab tests and blood work than she cares to remember.

However, that all changed when she moved to Vancouver earlier this year. She's fallen in love with the West Coast thanks in no small measure to the comprehensive health care she's been receiving at St. Paul's Hospital's ICC.

STREAMLINED SYSTEM

A new model of streamlined specialist care, the ICC, which opened in January 2009, caters to kidney patients who also have diabetes, heart disease or both. Traditionally, kidney patients see a nephrologist or go to a renal clinic and receive diabetes or cardiac care separately. The ICC, by contrast, could be considered the health-care equivalent of one-stop shopping: not only do patients get to see all of their specialists in the same location on the same day, they're also connected with a nurse who acts as their care co-ordinator, as well as dietitian, social worker and pharmacist. Plus, patients have all their tests ordered at once.

"I totally feel like a VIP there," says Barker of the ICC. "It made my transition to a new province a lot easier. I feel totally connected to the team. They're super supportive."

MULTIPLE BENEFITS

The ICC, which sees about 10 to 15 patients a week, arose out of research done by St. Paul's nephrologist and executive director of the BC Renal Agency Dr. Adeera Levin, who was the principal investigator on a randomized, controlled study conducted at Providence Health Care that ended in 2008. The study divided patients into two groups: one that went for standard care at separate clinics and another that visited an integrated clinic. The research found that patients in the combined clinic used fewer Emergency Department services than the others and had fewer hospital admissions.

Nephrologist Dr. Monica Beaulieu says that enabling patients to see all of their specialists in one visit makes an enormous difference. For one, those with multiple chronic conditions simply don't have the energy to attend multiple appointments. However, integrated care does a lot more than simply ease up on patients' schedules.

"People with all three diseases find it overwhelming to tell their story to three different people," Beaulieu says. "It's especially hard on an individual who winds up in hospital and is discharged with three new conditions they previously didn't have. It's exhausting, and it impacts their health. This is a way of easing the patient's journey."

Emily Barker says the ICC's comprehensive approach to helping her deal with complex medical issues makes her feel "like a VIP."



Integrated care also makes things easier for family members who need to take their loved ones to and from doctors appointments.

"We've had kudos from patients' middle-aged working children who don't have to take extra days off to make all the appointments," says Beaulieu. "Plus, patients get consistent health recommendations."

Dealing with two or three chronic diseases at once can indeed be confusing as the conditions have a complex relationship. Cardiovascular disease accounts for more than half of all deaths among people with kidney failure, and people with kidney disease are at higher risk of developing heart ailments. In addition, diabetes is a major risk factor for chronic kidney disease and heart disease.

Treating each disease separately can potentially lead to mixed messages. For instance, following a healthy diet is often a challenge for people with multiple conditions, since they may get varying dietary restrictions from their diabetes, heart and kidney specialists.

The ICC's co-operative strategy, on the other hand, allows for doctors to come up with a co-ordinated treatment plan.

"Patients end up a lot more confident and comfortable with their management of various issues," says Dr. Adam White, an endocrinologist (diabetes specialist) who is part of St. Paul's ICC team. "There's a communication flow between the various practitioners, and so any concerns are dealt with immediately and a joint plan is put in place. We will sit down and talk as a team."

That team effort has other positive ramifications, says ICC cardiologist Dr. Chris Thompson.

"An engaged, motivated patient is key to excellent patient outcomes," says Thompson, who notes he became involved in the ICC because he believes in its unified philosophy. "Patients appreciate the clinic's effort to respect their time by integrating their care. I believe this helps motivate them to become fully engaged in a self-management program, which will hopefully achieve the best outcomes possible."

FORGING HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS

Beaulieu emphasizes that the role of the ICC is not to take over patients' care from their own family doctors.

"Chronic-disease management is best served in the primary-care relationship," Beaulieu says. "We're here to help co-ordinate and to act as support as a health-care team. We ask GPs what level of involvement they'd like us to take. There's a definite benefit to the patient because they see that we're working with the primary caregivers and that we're all on the same page."

Another advantage is saving money. The integrated model eliminates the redundancy of medical and laboratory tests. Duplicate testing costs \$4.5 million each year in the province of B.C. alone, Beaulieu says. At the ICC, on the other hand, everything is centralized.

The ICC approach developed by staff at St. Paul's has been adapted in hospitals in Langley and Salmon Arm. Over the long term, the model could also be used to treat other complex chronic diseases, such as lung disorders, arthritis and mental health conditions and could also be established in other parts of the country.

"Everyone puts the patients' needs first," Beaulieu notes.

Barker, meanwhile, can't say enough good things about the ICC. She says her nurse co-ordinator, Shelley Burnett, has helped her find a family doctor and has also arranged for other medical care, such as an appointment with an ophthalmologist.

"I've been super impressed," Barker says. "I love the system. They're so on top of things, and I love how they're so committed and interested in my case."

In fact, says Barker, her care has been so comprehensive that it's also been a great source of comfort to her mom, who still lives in Alberta.

"She still nags me about the meds," Barker says with a laugh, "but I tell her about the in-depth care I'm getting at the ICC, and it's really reassuring for her." ■

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