



Toronto Grace Health Centre: Removing barriers in palliative care

By Stefani Venere

Toronto Grace Health Centre has been a leader in providing palliative care for almost 30 years.

Palliative care provides holistic end-of-life care and support to terminally ill patients and their families. Respecting each person's unique response to illness, the Grace offers patients a support system that enables each one to live as actively as possible until their life's journey ends. A 19 bed in-patient program integrates the physical, psychological and spiritual aspects of care to ensure that each person receives the comprehensive care and support they need.

In July, Toronto Grace expanded its admissions criteria to improve patients' access to the palliative care program. Previous admission guidelines were based on a patient prognosis of living three months or less and focused on care at the very end of life. New admission guidelines provide a broader approach that emphasizes the need for palliative symptom management throughout the course of illness.

In removing the 90 day restriction, the goal is to open up the opportunity for care to a greater number of patients. "If a patient has symptoms associated with their terminal illness that we can help with – we will. We pride ourselves on the patient-centred care we give to our patients and our new admission guidelines extends that care beyond our previous reach", says Deborah Randall-Wood, Patient Care Manager for the Palliative Care Program at Toronto Grace.

The previous criteria for palliative care admissions left many people without adequate support until their last 90 days. Admissions were more limited because referral sources often found it difficult to arrive at a clear and firm prognosis that met the three months or less time limit criteria. With the new guidelines, referral sources will



find it quicker and easier to get palliative patients the help they need. "The new guidelines reflect a growing shift in palliative care that has been going on for some time. With palliative care services increasingly recognized as beneficial to patients and their families earlier in the course of their illness, those services are more and more provided based on need rather than anticipated life expectancy," explains Dr. Donna Spaner, Clinical Director Palliative Care at Toronto Grace. Now if there is an open bed on the palliative unit and there is someone who needs palliation, the bed will be filled regardless of life expectancy.

The Palliative Care Program will be measuring results derived from these new admission guidelines by tracking the length of stay, number of admissions, and the number of people on waiting lists. It is too early to estimate the figures but Randall-Wood is confident that the community will be better served, and the number of people who have access to care from Toronto Grace will increase.

The success of the new initiative to expand the care for palliative patients largely

depends on the relationships with referring partners. Randall-Wood explains, "We work closely with our referring hospitals to ensure they and their patients know we are readily available to help with palliative symptom and pain management." She adds that the connection with their referring partners does not end there.

A close working relationship with other service providers helps the Grace expand individualized care plans for patients. "For example, if a patient is at the Grace and requires a treatment or therapy we cannot provide (such as a transfusion), we work out a plan with the referring hospital for the patient to return to them to get this therapy,

and then the patient comes back to us for palliative care," explains Randall-Wood. This comprehensive and collaborative approach better meets the patient's and family needs by enabling each facility in the continuum of care to do what it does best.

Accessibility to Toronto Grace Palliative Care Services is being expanded even further as the Monday to Friday admission week has been extended to include Saturdays and Sundays.

Along with this new expanded accessibility to palliative care, Toronto Grace remains a strong and important provider of end-of-life care in the community. The Community Palliative Care Program allows

patients to remain at home for as long as they are able. The physician based program offers on-call services for urgent medical problems that arise in the home setting after normal office hours. Physicians visit patients at home on a regular basis to provide expert palliative symptom management, ensure adequate and appropriate medication, and provide overall care, support and comfort to patients and their families. Toronto Grace Chaplains are also available and involved in providing support to the community palliative patients.

Through these program initiatives, Toronto Grace is improving patient access and broadening the understanding of and care for patients requiring palliation. The Grace is also now able to provide respite for more families of those with terminal illness. Offering a break for both the patient and the family is an essential part of the palliative care process which allows for a brief admission to the palliative care unit and then a planned return to home.

The vision of The Salvation Army Toronto Grace Health Centre is to transform the experience of rehabilitation, aging, chronic illness and end of life care with compassion, innovation and clinical excellence. The newly employed methodology to admissions is a reflection of this vision.

Stefani Venere is the Public Relations Coordinator at Toronto Grace Health Centre.



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