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## Local pharmacies a key ally in reducing vascular disease

*New provincial strategy boosts access, screening, treatment for patients at risk*

EDMONTON — Many Albertans at risk of developing cardiovascular diseases now have improved access to screening and treatment at their local pharmacies thanks to a new provincewide research program.

The R<sub>x</sub>EACH program enables pharmacists across the province to identify patients at risk of developing vascular diseases, such as heart attack and stroke, and to initiate treatment and management strategies.

“Most people at risk for heart attack and stroke have no symptoms, and people don’t realize they’re at risk until they have an event like a heart attack,” says pharmacist Dr. Ross Tsuyuki, Professor of Medicine at the University of Alberta and a member of the Cardiovascular Health & Stroke Strategic Clinical Network of Alberta Health Services (AHS).

“Pharmacists can identify patients who might otherwise fall through the cracks.”

Alberta is the only province in Canada that allows pharmacists with specialized training to play a larger role in patient care and write prescriptions for a range of chronic conditions.

Launched one year ago, R<sub>x</sub>EACH is part of the Vascular Risk Reduction (VRR) program – a comprehensive strategy by the Cardiovascular Health and Stroke Strategic Clinical Network (SCN) of AHS, aimed at identifying Albertans at risk for vascular disease and providing screening and risk factor management in communities. R<sub>x</sub>EACH is an equal partnership between the Cardiovascular Health & Stroke SCN, Alberta Health, the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary.

Pharmacists at 40 pharmacy sites across the province are now in the process of enrolling up to 1,200 patients with risk factors for heart disease or stroke (diabetes, previous cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease), who also have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar and/or who smoke. More than 400 Albertans have been enrolled to date.

Participants are evenly divided into two groups: one receives pharmacy-based advanced care, the other usual care, for a three-month duration. Participants in the advanced care stream receive a medication review; an assessment for diet/exercise; smoking cessation support; and a computerized tool that calculates their risk of having a cardiovascular event in the next 10 years and shows how that risk can be reduced. Both groups will be assessed at the end of the three months to determine if the risk of vascular disease was reduced in the advanced-care group. (Participants in the usual-care stream will then receive advanced care for three months.)

So far, 110 pharmacists from across the province have used R<sub>x</sub>EACH’s online education and training program. The training helps pharmacists identify clients with cardiovascular risk factors based on medications they are taking. Risk factors include diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking.

Depending on the patient's condition, participating pharmacists may adapt medications, or provide treatment recommendations, including lifestyle changes, such as diet and exercise, and wallet cards to track blood pressure. In some cases, pharmacists may refer the patient for blood work or to their family physician for followup.

“Community pharmacists can be a great source of health information and treatment when it comes to cardiovascular health,” says community pharmacist Tyler Watson. “Pharmacists are health professionals who are not only easily accessible, but can assist in helping patients manage their condition, assess for risk and make recommendations.”

Ninety per cent of Albertans have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease and it is one of the leading causes of death and disability in North America.

For more information on how to participate and for a list of participating pharmacies, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/10575.asp>.

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SCNs are provincewide teams comprised of health care professionals, researchers, community leaders, patients and policy makers, who are dedicated to developing care pathways in a specific area of health that will enhance the patient experience, improve outcomes and standardize care delivery across the province.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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