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Clinic Provides Relief for patients with a chronic cough

CALGARY - Southern Albertans with chronic coughs are getting relief with the support of a specialized clinic, the only one of its kind in the country.

The Chronic Cough Clinic at the Foothills Medical Centre helps people whose cough is not a symptom of a serious medical condition, such as lung cancer or tuberculosis, but is still negatively impacting their lives.

The clinic has reduced wait lists to see a local respirologist from three months, in 2005, to about 26 days today. This frees specialists to care for patients whose coughs have a serious, underlying cause.

“Many coughs are not life-threatening but they can be life-disabling,” says Dr. Stephen Field, a respirologist at the Foothills Medical Centre who helped establish the clinic in 2006.

“Many people experience coughing so violent, it leads to retching, vomiting and even incontinence. A large percentage has their sleep disrupted because they cough during the night. Then there is the anxiety component. People tell us, ‘My friend was diagnosed with lung cancer and my cough sounds just like hers.’ It isn’t cancer in most cases but it is in their mind.”

Every year the clinic serves about 200 patients, who are referred by family doctors or specialists. Field and certified respiratory educator Diane Conley assess each patient. If they determine the cough is not a symptom of a serious medical condition, Conley works with each patient over the course of two months to find the most effective way to manage the cough.

“There’s usually more than one reason why a patient is coughing,” says Conley, who runs the clinic. “Most chronic coughs are caused by either minor upper airway conditions, mild forms of asthma or acid reflux. Some chronic coughers have smoking-related bronchitis; others cough as a side-effect of medications used to treat high blood pressure and heart failure.”

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.5 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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