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Two-city teamwork helps kids with developmental disabilities

Win-win for Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital, Camrose Pediatric Specialty Clinic

EDMONTON / CAMROSE — Camrose children with developmental disabilities and their families can now access expert diagnosis in their community thanks to a new project involving the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital in Edmonton and the Camrose Pediatric Specialty Clinic.

The Camrose Pediatric Specialty Clinic offers rehabilitation provided by an occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech language pathologist, two psychologists, a social worker and a clinical co-ordinator. But without a developmental pediatrician on board, the clinic's capacity to help children and their families with specialized care in this area has been limited.

Since November, developmental pediatricians at the Glenrose have been collaborating remotely with the Camrose team using Alberta Health Services' Telehealth videoconferencing technology.

This saves time, travel and expense for patients and families, and also reduces delays and the number of appointments it takes to assess children and to decide on their future care. As well, Glenrose doctors driving to Camrose, or families heading to Edmonton, no longer have to cancel appointments when wintry Alberta highways turn icy.

"Camrose families would drive to the Glenrose to see a developmental pediatrician even though they have a team in their city that has already completed the bulk of the assessment," says Val Guiltner, director of pediatric rehabilitation at the Glenrose.

Ryan Sommer, project lead at the Glenrose, adds: "The piece that their team was missing was the developmental pediatrician — a physician with that very specialized skill set to help support the team in working with families with complicated medical and developmental needs.

"As it's often difficult for a Glenrose physician to travel to Camrose regularly to give outreach support, kids would sit on a waiting list in Camrose and end up, instead, having to come to Edmonton — only to sit on our waiting list here. This project not only reduces the wait list for kids to be served in their own community, but it means better accessibility in our Edmonton programs to see our own local kids. Now, it's a win-win."

For example, 'teleporting' a doctor to Camrose means the Glenrose will no longer have to create a whole new care team for a visiting Camrose child — duplicating work already done in Camrose.

Typically, upon referral for assessment, infants are seen within two weeks, toddlers within six months and school-aged children within 18 months to two years.

"The earlier we can see kids the better," says Guiltner. "With this project, I believe we can reduce these wait times by half."

Early results are promising, says Lorraine McPhee, a social worker on the Camrose team, which serves children and families across central Alberta.

“Partnering with the Glenrose is a great opportunity for us,” she says. “It enables our team to do the followup work with families right here in our community. And that’s huge, when you’re looking at family-centred care. The feedback we’ve received from families has been positive.”

Dustin Manchester, a father of two special needs children, says the project enables his family to see the children’s health care team during one visit in Camrose rather than multiple visits in two cities. “The care has been really good,” Manchester says.

Glenrose developmental pediatricians Dr. Lyn Sonnenberg and Dr. Gail Andrew, along with medical fellows under their guidance, now join monthly Camrose team meetings to review patient referrals and triage for appropriate services.

“It’s my hope that keeping families in their local communities and getting the resources there — with me as an additional resource — is beneficial to everybody,” says Dr. Sonnenberg. “By making use of both Camrose and Glenrose resources, there’s more capacity for all.”

Adds Dr. Andrew: “Kids just love the idea of a doctor on TV as they’re so familiar with screens and technology today. The family, if they wish, can also bring other members of their community team such as teachers and other service providers. Information on their child can be directly shared with everyone involved, and there are opportunities to ask questions to ensure that the recommendations from the assessment are meeting the needs and goals for their child.”

The new one-stop assessment process works like this:

- Children identified as needing the services of a developmental pediatrician are scheduled for a multidisciplinary clinic visit in Camrose, which includes an assessment done by the Glenrose physician via Telehealth.
- After this assessment, the Glenrose physician then joins the team conference, again via Telehealth, for a comprehensive review of the results.
- This is followed by a conference with the child, family, the full multidisciplinary team, and local stakeholders such as teachers, for discussion and collaboration on next steps.

“This Pediatric Specialty Clinic session is a great example of how Telehealth eliminates barriers to patient care by enabling clinicians to deliver health care and expertise with the use of video-conferencing,” says Judy Treppel, Provincial Manager, Clinical Telehealth Information Technology. “It allows for options for care and support closer to home.”

Adds Guiltner: “Families are benefiting because we are sharing our resources in a positive way to meet their needs most efficiently. This is across zones, across teams. This is really adding value to a strong service that already exists in the Camrose community. This is really about us sharing responsibility for that child, and that family, and making sure that the care is appropriate.”

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.