

# Lakehead Nurse Practitioner - Led Clinic: The Changing Role of Nurses



Lead Nurse Practitioner Pam Delgaty and Clinic Administrator Kyle Jessiman at the Lakehead Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinic. Not only does the clinic help address the doctor shortage, it is helping reduce at least some patient visits to the Emergency Department at the Health Sciences Centre.

by Graham Strong

The role of nurses in healthcare is changing today more than ever. That's especially apparent at the Lakehead Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinic, which opened at the old McKellar Hospital site in November 2010.

"I'm sure all the retired nurses like my mother who are looking back can't believe how far we've come in nursing," said Pam Delgaty, Lead Nurse Practitioner at the clinic. "We can now do things like write prescriptions and provide a full range of primary healthcare services."

The Thunder Bay clinic was one of the first

four to open in Ontario. Now there are 25 clinics across the province providing primary care to thousands of patients who did not have access to that care before.

"NPs are not meant to replace physicians," Delgaty said. "But for primary healthcare, there are a lot of studies that show NPs are able to provide good care. Most people find it is quite similar."

In just over a year, the four NPs at the clinic reached capacity with 800 patients each for a total of 3,200 patients. Delgaty said that many of these patients have chronic diseases like diabetes, COPD, and hypertension who benefit greatly from primary care to avoid

declines in health and trips to the Emergency Department.

That in itself will indirectly reduce the pressure on the Emergency Department at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, which is one of the busiest in the country. Kyle Jessiman, the Clinic Administrator, said he's seen first hand the impact it has had directly as well.

"About half of the walk-in patients we surveyed said they would have gone to the ER, so it's good to see that we were able to divert some of them back to us," Jessiman said.

Jessiman said that overall, patient satisfaction with the clinic has been extremely high. Some patients do need time to get used to the idea that they are seeing a nurse practitioner for their care, not a physician, he said. He added though that the multi-disciplinary style of care – the clinic also employs a social worker and a dietician, and has access to specialists like mental health and addiction specialists – is well received by patients.

"All of our feedback has been very positive," Jessiman said. "They're telling us that the appointments are thorough and the NPs are attentive. We're spending more time with the patients as much as we can."

The only major difference that most people would see is that NPs cannot prescribe narcotics like codeine-based pain relievers, so the clinic is not a good fit for patients with chronic pain, for example. But NPs can prescribe most other medications and order tests as needed, just like physicians. NP-led clinics are also overseen by a physician – in this case, Dr. Ric Almond – who is also available for consultations for cases outside the NP's scope of practice.

Although the clinic is currently at capacity

and not accepting any more patients, there is space for at least two more NPs. The clinic has applied to get the funding needed to fill those spots. Not only is the need there for the community, but unlike trying to find new doctors, there are many NPs in Ontario right now looking for positions like these.

"We could easily bring in five new NPs, if we had the funding," Delgaty said.

In fact, with no end in sight to the doctor shortage, more and more people may be getting their primary care from NP-led clinics in the future.

"That's really where nursing has come to. It's really exciting," Delgaty said.

## What is a Nurse Practitioner (NP)?

A nurse practitioner (NP) is a registered nurse who has taken additional training to provide a wider range of care. That includes what is called "primary care", which traditionally was provided by a family physician. But with doctor shortages throughout Ontario and especially in Northwestern Ontario, thousands of people do not have a family doctor. Healthcare professionals are looking for different ways to provide that primary care.

Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinics is one answer. NPs can provide most of the same services as a doctor, making them a practical alternative for those who need a primary care provider.

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