

Beginning the Conversation

Everyone has a story—a story that provides them with a history, an identity, and a sense of meaning. When people become ill, sometimes they feel that their illness becomes their story. They are no longer known for their accomplishments or their relationships, but only for their health condition.

When health care providers go to serve that patient, they may feel that, in order to meet the immediate needs of that patient, the larger story must be set aside. Certainly, there are times when the severity of the medical needs demand that all of the provider's attention. But for the patient, their story lends them meaning and motivation. The Health Link approach tries to bring the patient story back into the planning and provision of care. Repeatedly, Health Link patients say "I feel heard". The Health Link approach is exactly that honoring of the patient story.

Hearing the Patient's Story

Truly patient centred care is when a patient is given the time and space to consider their goals, often in light of changing health conditions.

Asking the question "what is your goal?" is a question that a patient may need time to answer. However, it is in the very asking of the question that may open up possibilities which were previously unrealized.

Michelle Cassista, of the Community Paramedics, recounts asking "what is your goal?" to a Health Link patient on her first visit. It took some time for the patient to articulate it, but it emerged that her goal

was to fix up her home outside of town in order to sell it and move into a more manageable accommodation. The patient realized that, as she aged, she was finding it hard to keep up the house as well as get drives to places and events. She did not want to ask her adult children for this kind of assistance, because they were struggling with their own ill health.

The very next time Michelle visited, she was surprised to see that the patient had hired a cleaner. The patient stated that she had hired the cleaner in order to assist with readying the house for sale. As Michelle and the patient conversed about her transportation needs, the cleaner overheard and suggested that she could find a driver to take the patient to church. On Michelle's subsequent visit, the patient reported that the volunteer drivers were also making sure that she was attending a regular potluck in the community. Also, she reported that her adult children had realized that she was in need of more regular practical assistance. With all these additional supports from her community and her family, the patient was reconsidering her decision to move. Michelle felt that in taking the Health Link approach, Michelle had given her permission to consider her full story.



Creating a Shared Purpose

It is in sharing our stories, that we create a shared purpose. When we hear the stories of Health Link patients, we realize that their health and social circumstances do not match the way in which they are receiving services. And we realize that there are changes we can make as service providers, in relationship with the patient and caregivers.

We see this shared purpose among our partners. With their leadership, we were able to exceed our 2016-17 target with 124 Health Link patients identified and with completed Coordinated Care Plans.

And we see this shared purpose on a regional level. In response to the Health Link collaboration occurring across the LHIN, Cal Martell, the LHIN's Vice President of Health System Integration, wrote to Health Link leadership and project managers:

"Let me first of all extend my deepest appreciation for both the outstanding levels of commitment and collaboration you and your teams have demonstrated over the past year, but most importantly, your success in spreading the benefit of the Health Links approach to more than 1,100 clients this year to date." (March 17, 2017 email)

Evolving Partnerships

There has been a recent change in the leadership of the North Renfrew County Health Link Steering Committee. On April 13, 2017, Jeffrey Weatherill informed us of his decision to step down from the co-chair position. We thank him for his leadership and his early and persistent calls for meaningful, patient-centred care which helped ensure the implementation of this Health Link.

We are pleased to announce that Dr. Declan Rowan has accepted the co-chair position. Petawawa Centennial Family Health Centre was an early adopter of the Health Link approach. In fact, Dr. Rowan spoke at our May 2016 governance session about how this approach has made a significant difference to the complex patients whom he serves. He has the support of the PCFHC board and the Executive Director, Judy Hill. As North Renfrew County Health Link develops into a mature network of collaborating partners providing coordinated care across sectors, we welcome Dr. Rowan in this leadership role.

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