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Creating a culture of collaboration

➤ Oxford agencies connect with health links initiative

John Tapley
Ingersoll Times

Working together to improve health-care services for people with complex needs was the focus when representatives of local health care providers and other agencies in Oxford County met in Ingersoll on Tuesday.

The session at St. James Anglican Church was organized by the South West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) to discuss health links - an initiative launched by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care in 2012.

In Ontario, people with complex needs represent 10% of the population, but that 10% consumes services that account for 77% of the expenditures in the province's health-care system.

Complex needs cases are identified as people with multiple issues and/or conditions who frequently visit emergency departments or are regularly admitted to hospital, resulting from their health care/well-being needs not being met in a sustainable way.

The goal of health links is to have all relevant agencies work together to develop coordinated care plans that will get people with complex needs the right care in the right place at the right time.

Tuesday's session included three presentations, starting with Michael Barrett, CEO of the South West LHIN, who outlined health links and what they mean for complex patients.

Mike McMahon, executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Oxford, and Christina Smits, interim executive director of the Woodstock and Area Community Health Centre, spoke about the health link journey in Oxford County.

Lisa Longworth, community services co-ordinator with the Ingersoll Nurse

Practitioner-Led Clinic, explained how local partners are working together to align with health links.

Barrett said the first 200 people involved in an initiative in Quebec similar to health links reported an improved sense of well-being. It also resulted in a 72% drop in their emergency room visits and being admitted to hospital 83% fewer times.

"The last thing I want (people to think) is that we're trying to avoid use of hospitals," Barrett said.

He mentioned the importance of the Home First program that has been implemented at hospitals in Oxford. The goal of the program is to assist patients to remain in their own homes as long as possible, which has been shown to improve health outcomes.

"When a frail senior shows up at a hospital, their next destination doesn't have to be a long-term care facility," he said.

Other important goals are to provide behavioural supports for people with mental health issues and to support people who have palliative care needs.

McMahon outlined what's involved in becoming active with health links. The first step is to conduct a readiness assessment. Then a business plan describing outcomes has to be developed before health links services can be launched.

In Oxford County, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, ischemic heart disease, arthritis and mental health and addiction issues are common conditions among complex needs patients.

Health links is about creating "a culture of collaboration," Smits said.

She explained the Canadian Index of Well-Being. Developed in 1999, it gauges several factors, including education, time use, environment, leisure and culture, healthy populations, living standards, community vitality and democratic engagement, to measure stability and well-being of Canadians over time.

"It's doing more with what we have," said Longworth about health links.

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