

Spread of Primary Care Supports for Digestive Health Care

The digest: summer 2019 edition

Background

Beginning in 2014, primary care and the gastroenterology (GI) specialty care providers in the Calgary Zone developed a partnership to address significant challenges in access to GI specialty care. They collaboratively developed evidence-based primary care pathways to guide management of low-risk GI conditions within the Medical Home. They later collaborated to develop [Specialist Link](#), a rapid response telephone advice service that has since expanded to include 16 specialties. These primary care supports were designed to:

- strengthen primary-specialty care integration
- build capacity within the patient's Medical Home
- improve access to specialty care when required
- reduce GI consultations for patients with low-risk indicators
- improve cost effectiveness through appropriate provision of specialty care and avoidance of unnecessary invasive investigations

Primary care pathways and telephone advice have had significant positive impact within the Calgary Zone:

- The wait list for routine GI referrals decreased from 2,742 to none
- GI/hepatology primary care pathways are downloaded an average of 340 times/month
- 55% of family physicians are aware of pathways and 78% of these reported they have changed their clinical practice
- 89% of family physicians are aware of Specialist Link and 73% report that it changed their practice
- Average of 112 GI/hepatology calls to Specialist Link/month, with average system savings of \$133/call (avoided consultations and emergency department visits)

In 2017, the Edmonton North Primary Care Network implemented Connect MD as a pilot project to test out phone advice in the Edmonton Zone. Based on the success of this pilot, Connect MD has been made available to all PCNs in the Edmonton Zone, and its utilization and impact continue to grow.

[eReferral Advice Request](#) has also been developed as a platform for non-urgent electronic consultation with specialist care providers, and is now available for GI care across Alberta and for hepatology care in the North, South, Edmonton, and Calgary Zones.



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Our vision

Building upon these foundational successes, this two-year project will develop and promote the adoption of primary care pathways, phone advice, and Advice Request across Alberta. “Our goal is to work collaboratively to improve the availability of evidence-based resources, such as primary care pathways, to support care provided in the medical home so patients don’t have to wait for appropriate care,” explains co-sponsor Dr. Novak.

Dr. Julia Carter adds that, “This project will expand access to tools that will help primary care providers optimize the care of patients within the medical home, and that will empower patients to self-manage their conditions. Co-designed, evidence-based primary care pathways are the “guts” of this project; when an opinion from a specialist is required, it can be provided electronically, by phone or in person, depending on the needs of the patient and primary care provider.” So far, three of the original Calgary pathways have been reviewed and adapted for provincial use (GERD, dyspepsia, and *H. pylori*), with others to come in fall 2019 and beyond. Please see the following:

1. [Gastroesophageal reflux disease \(GERD\)](#)
2. [Dyspepsia](#)
3. [Helicobacter pylori \(H. pylori\)](#)

Next steps

Two grant-funded staff have been hired to support development of the primary care supports and to facilitate implementation. The team is working closely with the PHCIN and other partners to ensure alignment with other initiatives designed to enhance access to specialty care.

Collaboration with zone-based teams and leaders has already begun in the Edmonton and Central Zones and will continue into the North and South Zones in year two of the project. Primary and specialty care providers will be actively engaged to understand the local context and customize implementation based on local needs, resources, and priorities.

Beyond the work to implement these primary care supports focused on digestive health care, the intent is to develop a foundational template that will support future integration of other high-demand specialty services.

As described by Rob Skrypnek, Senior Provincial Director of the PHCIN, “Improving access to specialist expertise and care is a critical priority for primary care providers. This project is well positioned to support these goals in the digestive health field and will provide important learning to enable more effective spread of access improvement strategies across specialty groups and throughout Alberta.”

To learn more, or to get involved in work in your area, please contact digestivehealth.scn@ahs.ca.

