

Couple Stays Together with Community Support

Primary Health Care Integrated Geriatric Services Initiative

Even in the early stages of her dementia, 82-year-old Melissa* cooked meals for her husband Ben*. Ben began noticing that Melissa increasingly forgot to turn off the stove. He became concerned for her safety when he had to leave her alone.

Connie Reichel, Primary Care Nurse at the Kneehill Medical Clinic in Three Hills, became involved when the family wanted to find safer living conditions for Melissa and Ben.

“Staying together was what mattered most to them,” Connie says. She referred the family to the Alzheimer’s Society First Link®. Between them and the clinic, they decided the couple could move to a supportive living facility (SL3) in Three Hills. Their meals were prepared, pills dispensed, home care visits arranged; and staff was on site 24 hours a day.

“Melissa flourished,” Connie says. “Because of the activities offered she was able to socialize more and increase her physical activity, allowing her to function better.”

Everything went well for more than a year when Ben fell and broke his hip. Melissa became agitated, had a seizure and was hospitalized. Ben became increasingly frail.

“He needed help getting off the toilet, which Melissa would do—until they both fell,” Connie says. “It became clear that their situation was hazardous to both of them.”

Communication key to success

Once again, the family met with health professionals in the Kneehill Medical Clinic (part of the Big Country Primary Care Network), the Alzheimer’s Society of Alberta and the Northwest Territories, among other community partners, to discuss increasing the care for Melissa and Ben, who still wanted to be together. The couple moved into a fully supported dementia care facility in Red Deer (SLD4) where they remain together.

“We were able to keep them together, even with big changes in their functionality, by having open communication with the family, the Kneehill Medical Clinic, Homecare and all of the other caregivers,” Connie says.

Ben and Melissa’s family wrote a letter of thanks to the clinic, saying "Being part of the dementia program at the medical clinic has been a very good experience for my mom and dad. My mom was able to stay in her community as long as possible and have great support from PCN and Homecare...Thank you for all your support!!"

Community receives support



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Connie attributes the success partially to the Primary Health Care Integrated Geriatric Services Initiative (PHC IGSI) a provincial initiative which supports local primary health care teams in advancing priorities aimed at improving supports for those living in their community with cognitive impairment or dementia.

PHC IGSI helped the clinic to identify patients at risk, screen them for dementia and provide referrals to Addiction and Mental Health and Home Care, provided by Alberta Health Services; and Alzheimer's First Link®. The Kneehill clinic has implemented the 5M® care plan framework provided through PHC IGSI. The framework serves as a tool for those providing support to consider elements in five key areas. The areas include mind, medication, mobility, multi-complexity and matters most. The information collected serves to inform conversations with the individual and their care partner about areas they feel they would most benefit from support in.

"In complex situations it helps us assess living conditions, health and social concerns," Connie says. In addition, PHC IGSI provided the community with education and the tools to build a coalition to help create a Dementia Friendly Community.

The Kneehill Clinic supports Kneehill County residents in Three Hills, Trochu, Linden, Carbon, Torrington and surrounding areas, serving about 11,500 people; in 2019, 141 people visiting the clinic were living with dementia.

*Not their real names.

Community partners

- Alzheimer's Society of Alberta and the Northwest Territories
- Big Country Primary Care Network
- Homecare, Alberta Health Services (AHS)
- Addiction and Mental Health, AHS
- Kneehill Medical Clinic