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Family-doctor access promised for 2015

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A pilot project that included Prince George provided the basis for the new A GP for Me program, which will be launched April 1 and promises all B. C. citizens who want a family doctor will be able to access one by 2015.

The program is being provided through a partnership between the province and the B.C. Medical Association. About \$132.4 million will fund the program, with a significant portion of the money coming from the existing physician master agreement.

The program will provide funding so doctors can consult with patients via phone, provide incentives for doctors to take on more patients with complex conditions like cancer, and provide funding supporting local physician groups to work collaboratively with health authorities to support better access to primary care.

Simultaneously a complementary program will be launched so patients in the hospital get care from their family doctor.

Dr. Garry Knoll, chair of board of Prince George Division of Family Practice, which participated in the pilot project, said physicians in the division involved were given support to develop programs for unattached patients they thought would work in their community.

In Prince George this meant attacking the

problem on several different fronts, Knoll said.

"For Prince George we decided if we were going to increase capacity, a problem as large as it was, we figured it would have to be a multi-faceted program. So we sketched out a program that does a few things."

They began by trying to help patients that face multiple barriers because of disease and, sometimes, socio-economic problems.

"Often those folks have neglected their health problems and have a higher rate of disease than others," Knoll said.

They opened the Blue Pine clinic which is currently taking unattached patients from places like the heart clinic and emergency.

"The plan is the Blue Pine clinic would scale up and eventually begin to take others who identified themselves who don't have family doctors.," he said.

Northern Health and the division supports the clinic in a number of ways.

A second prong of the plan teaches doctors a more efficient way to run the office.

"We're excited about a program to increase physician's capacity to see patients in an efficient way by off-loading tasks they do that don't really need their expertise. The

office is redesigned so it's more efficient and everyone can do a better targeted job.

Primary care coaches were employed to help doctors achieve more efficiency, since, Knoll said, doctors are already so busy it's difficult for them to do strategic planning.

They are also working with the city and Northern Health as well as with public health for an integrated and collaborative approach to decrease the demands on the health care system by improving the health of Prince George citizens.

Knoll said his best educated guess is there were somewhere between 13,000 and 14,000 people without family doctors in the area when the program started.

About a year ago Knoll said they found about 4,000 of those had found doctors.

Knoll, who sometimes works at the Spruceland walk-in clinic, said according to his experience, there has been a difference.

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