

MEDIA RELEASE

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WHAT IS PERSON-CENTRED CARE?

And how it's helping improve people's health and wellbeing in Sydney's North.

Person-centred care may well be the future of general practice in Australia, and it is here now in Sydney's North. A person-centred care model combines the traditional values of a family-focused medical practice - providing comprehensive, coordinated, integrated, quality care which is easily accessible. It is a team-based approach with an ongoing, active relationship between a person and their healthcare team.

In the Northern Sydney region, a growing number of practices have embraced the person-centred care model for the benefit of their patients. Currently, twenty-seven General Practices are engaged with the Sydney North Health Network in becoming higher-performing health care teams. Given the uniqueness of each practice, Sydney North Health Network provides a tailored program of education, quality improvement coaching and practice support. There is also an emphasis on using data and technology to drive improvement. As a result, practices are excelling in achieving better patient outcomes and experiences.

"Person-centred care focusses on the patient, their needs, and their goals to achieve better health outcomes. It is a team-based approach to healthcare, where the GP works with a team to look after a patient's welfare and health. This allows health professionals to focus on their skill sets and deliver a better quality of care to patients," says Sydney Northside GP, Dr Kiril Siebert.

Northern beaches resident Meg Parsons was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) – a condition that if not managed properly, can have debilitating consequences. Meg's condition was progressively getting worse, and her quality of life was deteriorating.

The day Meg stepped into a person-centred care practice; she noticed a difference. Meg was not well that day, and the practice receptionist recognised her distress, enabling the practice nurse and GP to see her promptly. Although Meg had difficulty breathing, she was adamant; she did not want to go to a hospital emergency department. The practice team listened to her concerns and undertook an immediate course of treatment. The team placed Meg on oxygen, and soon her breathing had greatly improved, alleviating her distress.

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As a result of Meg's visit, the practice nurse, Kath Chapman, became Meg's primary contact for ongoing communication. Kath referred Meg to the best health services able to aid in better managing her condition. Also, passionate GP Dr Mehrnoosh Alian now provides an ongoing and preventative approach to Meg's care.

"You don't have to be sick to receive care. It can all be a part of your preventative healthcare program. When a person is involved in their own care, they have a better understanding of their own needs. A big part of the person-centred care concept is the healthcare team supporting each other through this holistic approach. This reduces burnout and makes us all better healthcare professionals," says Dr Alian.

"We spend time with the patient to work out what they need and what is important to them. We like to make sure they keep the same doctor and nurse and work towards their healthcare goals as a team. In this practice, I am in a very lucky position where they allow me to spend time with the patient, which is critical. I get to do a full health assessment which can take up to an hour depending on complexity, then we go and talk to the GP together. So, it's about connecting with and continually touching base with the patient. We get to know them, we spend time with them, we follow-up and connect them to services around the local community to aid them in getting well and staying healthy," says practice nurse Kathleen Chapman.

The person-centred care team empowered Meg to be at the centre of her care, encouraging her to take proactive steps to manage her condition. The practice referred Meg to a local hospital to undertake exercise rehabilitation and to a specialist physiotherapist who focused on her breathing techniques, building up lung capacity. The practice team also arranged for an aged care assessment, providing Meg with a home cleaning service. Having this service meant that Meg's home became dust-free, helping her breathe more easily. Meg was now able to focus on her exercise regime, using a pedometer, and tracking her steps and improving her overall fitness.

"I was blown away with how the person-centred care practice helped me. Suddenly my whole world and health improved. I had choices. I was connected to the services I needed, and I could be proactive and in charge of my own health," says Meg.

Sydney North Health Network undertakes support and education to healthcare teams wanting to enhance the patient experience of co-ordinated or person-centred care. This support includes improving practice systems and data collection, optimising patient's health and wellbeing, as well as improving the work-life of healthcare clinicians.

"Person-centred care or person-centred medical home as it is often called focuses on important aspects of delivering healthcare – leadership skills, team-based care and provider wellbeing. This comprehensive model of care also provides additional value for patients and prevents burnout of our medical professionals through a shared or team approach," says Sue Barry from the Sydney North Health Network.

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“Through this model of care, patients that were previously really isolated in the community now have a place to come and build health-based relationships with our healthcare team and other patients. This is really rewarding. It is about having a team devoted to your care instead of just an individual healthcare professional. It is also about prevention as well as treatment. Whether you are struggling with a number of chronic conditions or reasonably healthy we insist on regularly checking back in with the patient to keep them accountable to achieving their health goals and stay on track with their health outcomes,” reinforces dietician Lisa Mesiti.

Dr Kiril Siebert recently travelled to the USA on a study tour of general medical practices using the person-centred care model. Dr Siebert observed that general practice teams in the American healthcare system are much bigger than those in Australian general practice.

“In the US practice system, there is often a doctor, nurse, behavioural therapist, pharmacist, medical assistants and care coordinators all in the one practice. I also noticed that the practices in America rely heavily on their data and how that data is utilised to proactively improve the quality of care and used as a benchmark to improve standards. American practices are also not shy to share their data within practices or beyond. In fact, they were very upfront and proud about sharing their data, which I think is great and something we could do better here in Australia,” said Dr Siebert.

Dr Siebert was also impressed by one of the American practices that had a ‘Patient and Family Advisory Committee’ or PFAC for short. A PFAC is a committee of 10 patients with whom the practice consults with on health campaigns and utilises for potential practice improvements.

“We met members of this committee, and they were really enthusiastic and empowered about the part they played in their own healthcare. I would love to introduce PFACs here in Australia,” says Dr Siebert.

Person-centred care is an example of our continually evolving primary health care system. Sydney North Health Network welcomes General Practices in our region to become involved in the program. Participating practices benefit from the opportunity to grow the capacity of their team while networking with the wider health care neighbourhood.

For Meg Parsons, person-centred care has made a world of difference to her life. Meg sums up her experience nicely by saying, “person-centred care makes you feel very important and like you are worthwhile. My care team went through and ticked all the boxes. The caring nature of the concept, detailed health follow-ups and ability to feedback makes it feel like you have an extension of your family to care for you.”

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