

District looking to boost health care with clinics

By Allison Brownlee

There is a lot of buzz around Donna Kearney's clinic.

The nurse practitioner opened the Rosseau Nursing Station nine years ago and, with funding from the provincial government as well as generous donations from seasonal and permanent residents, Kearney has turned her clinic into a model District Municipality of Muskoka councillors want to emulate.

But it is not just the money and high-tech equipment that allows her to provide a greater scope of practice. Kearney also works with medical students at the clinic – she mentors them and they bring their knowledge of emerging medical practices.

"We learn from one another. We keep each other current and if there is a new procedure being done ... I can learn how to do it and provide that service out here," she said.

During a slow month, about 250 seasonal residents, permanent residents, college students and visitors walk through her clinic doors. During a busy month that number could balloon to 450.

Kearney said she considers her station and nurse practitioner clinics vital, especially in rural communities.

If clinics such as hers did not exist, she suggests that many rural residents would not have access to health care. Reasons could include their age, economic position or distance from other health-care providers.

"Many of them wouldn't get their chronic diseases managed well and they would end up in hospital in crisis," she said. "Given the type of people that live in rural Ontario, if you don't make it easy for them, they are going to manage their situations."

Wait times in doctor's offices may also prevent people from seeking care, Kearney noted.

By being in Rosseau, she said her clinic is in a central location within equal distance to the Parry Sound, Bracebridge and Huntsville hospital sites. The collaborative nature of nurse practitioner clinics is also part of Kearney's clinic as she said she works well with the hospitals' staff.

The scope of what nurse practitioners can practice in Ontario is expanding. For example, new legislation kicked in this month that gives them the authority to prescribe a greater variety of medications and order a broader range of laboratory tests.

Other services at the clinics can include annual physicals, episodic illness care, falls prevention programs for older persons,

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immunizations, smoking cessation, cancer screening, injury prevention as well as monitoring and management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, asthma, heart disease and mental health conditions.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care launched a program in 2007 to create 25 nurse practitioner clinics across the province. All of them will be up and running by 2012.

The only Muskoka clinic opened as part of the program is based in Huntsville.

To help address the health-care needs in the region, district council approved an ad hoc task group in August that is examining nursing stations and clinics. A councillor from each of the region's six lower-tier municipalities is part of the group. As part of that investigation, the district has created a health-care needs survey that is available online and in paper format for permanent and seasonal residents to complete.

Rick Williams, commissioner of community services for the district, said there are three main goals of the survey.

The first is to gather demographic information, which will help determine where people who require care are located.

The second is to find out what their health-care needs are and the third is to determine how much people know about

what nurse practitioner clinics can offer.

"That awareness is tied to the viability of nurse practitioners being part of the rural service response," said Williams.

He said the Rosseau Nursing Station has intrigued some district council members in part because Muskoka's communities have many of the same needs as Parry Sound.

But Williams emphasized that there was no interest in working at odds with regional family health teams, hospitals or other health-care providers.

"Nurse practitioner clinics could be a very accessible, local service that would give immediate care and also (refer) a person who needed extended emergency services either at the hospital or a specialty centre in Toronto," he said.

After examining existing systems and the demographic need in Muskoka, the district will develop a plan that would cost-effectively address health-care needs in the community. That plan, which Williams said should come together in the next six months, would be shared with area health-care organizations before being sent to the province for funding consideration.

The survey is available from town and township offices as well as the district office, or online www.surveymonkey.com/s/HealthCareNeeds.