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Volunteers with first-hand experience provide comfort to cardiac patients

By Akilah Dressekie

The impact of cardiac disease on a patient's life can be overwhelming, and a traumatic event like a heart attack or cardiac intervention can be life-changing. While proper medical care is critical, sometimes the calming touch or encouraging words of a person who has survived the same ordeal can be a major source of reassurance for someone in crisis.

That idea is at the cornerstone of a volunteer program at Rouge Valley Health System (RVHS), a community hospital serving east Toronto and west Durham. The program pairs cardiac patients who are being treated in the Cardiac Catheterization Lab (Cath Lab) and Cardiac Rehabilitation program—both located at the Rouge Valley Centenary (RVC) hospital campus—with volunteers who have survived a cardiac event.

"The excellent health-care providers in our cardiac program are valuable, but don't necessarily have the first-hand experience of being a cardiac patient. So, staff consider the volunteers to be an important part of our team. The patients feel comfortable asking them lifestyle questions, and will open up to them about their fears," says Bryna Rabishaw, program director, cardiac services. She adds that this helps patients to see that living a happy, healthy life after the cardiac event is still possible.

The role of the volunteers is not to provide medical advice, but to offer comfort from the perspective of someone who has already been there. In fact, one of the criteria for volunteering in the Cath Lab and the Cardiac Rehabilitation program is that every volunteer must have been a former cardiac patient. They must have experienced a cardiac event first-hand, whether it is a heart attack, angiogram, angioplasty or heart bypass, and have completed a Cardiac Rehabilitation program, whether at RVC or at another facility.

Volunteers in the Cardiac Rehabilitation program assist exercise therapists by walking the exercise track



**Rouge Valley Health System volunteer and former cardiac patient Lois Upham comforts cardiac patient Larry Pinner in Rouge Valley Centenary's Cardiac Catheterization Lab.**

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with current patients, and giving them exercise or lifestyle tips. Patients and volunteers get a chance to talk about their personal experiences with heart disease.

Volunteers also encourage patients to ask questions and attend educational classes. In the Cath Lab, volunteers speak with the patients and their families as they wait to have a procedure or test completed. The volunteers explain what patients can expect that day, helping to calm their nerves. Volunteers also encourage patients to ask their cardiologists questions.

In 1996, after RVC volunteer Lois Upham received an angiogram at RVC, she had surgery to replace her mitral valve. It was a stressful time for Lois and her family. And while physicians and other health-care providers did their best to ease her fears, what was missing was someone who had been through the same experience. Someone to hold Lois' hand and reassure her that everything would be okay.

Thankfully, the procedure went well, and she was able to successfully complete a cardiac rehabilitation program at another facility. Lois knew that when she was well again, she would give back to the health-care professionals at RVC that helped her to become well. Two years after completing cardiac rehabilitation, Lois became a patient advocate with the Cardiac Cath Lab Service Committee, a small committee in RVC's Cath Lab that meets each month. Her role was to help better inform the committee's decisions by providing a patient perspective.

Two cardiologists on that committee approached Lois about launching a volunteer program in the RVC Cath Lab. The three decided that the volunteers should have personally experienced a cardiac event so that they could talk to patients about what to expect.

Over the next two months, Lois spent time every week sitting with nervous patients and their families in the Cath Lab, describing the day's procedures to them and answering any questions. After seeing the positive impact that Lois was having on patients, a structured volunteer program was rolled out. That was 11 years ago. Now, Lois oversees a team of six volunteers who each spend one day a week helping to comfort patients and their families in the Cath Lab. Whether volunteers are getting a cup of water, a blanket or some food for patients, or sitting with patients and their families to describe the day's procedure, they are helping to provide some comfort.

"Almost every patient that comes through the doors of the Cath Lab is nervous. Our primary goal is to settle their fears," says Lois. "My theory is that if you know the devil you're dealing with, you can cope a lot better. We have a wonderful, committed team of volunteers, and none of this could be possible without them," she adds.

Since 2007, Brian Shedden has been a track volunteer with the Cardiac Rehabilitation team. He is one of 34 volunteers on the 11th floor of RVC, where there is a large workout facility that features an indoor track, treadmills, small weights, and even a cardiac education theatre.

Brian's journey from being a patient to becoming a volunteer began with a heart attack in 2003 when he was just 43 years of age. That life-altering experience led the father of four and manager of a Toronto-area construction company to make some important lifestyle changes. For him, becoming a volunteer in the same facility where he completed his cardiac rehabilitation was a way to give back.

"That brush with mortality tends to shake your foundation. You fight through a range of different emotions—from fear, denial, to anger. A lot of our work is just talking and interacting with the patients. We're not here to give medical advice, but we can lend an ear and give encouragement. Having someone there with you that's been through it can make a world of a difference," he says.

Brian finds it especially rewarding when patients he has worked with graduate from the Cardiac Rehabilitation Program. “You get to feel like you’ve really made a positive impact on someone,” says Brian.

For Mahesh Ajwani, being able to talk to someone who has been through a similar event like this has brought a bit of comfort to an otherwise stressful situation. Last November, he had a heart attack, and he was given an angioplasty. Today, he takes brisk walks with Brian on RVC’s indoor track as part of his cardiac rehabilitation fitness program. “The volunteers definitely help to make you feel more comfortable, and help you to ease into the program better.” he says. “They’ve been through it themselves. It really does help to have someone who’s been through the same experience walking alongside you, and encouraging you.”

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