

Paramedics Rely on Expanding Scope of Practice to Improve Rural Health Care

By Martin Schuldhaus, Communications Manager Alberta College of Paramedics

RURAL Alberta is thriving. However, as Alberta towns and municipalities expand in population, so does the need for crucial, life-saving rural health care services. Rainbow Lake is a prime example.

Built around Northern Alberta's bustling oil and gas industry, Rainbow Lake has a population of just under 1,100 people located west of High Level. With the nearest hospital more than an hour away, the town has one health clinic consisting of four treatment rooms and two emergency beds. However, this clinic has something most don't: skilled, regulated staff paramedics with the technical experience to complement the most experienced nurse practitioner or rural physician.

"We assess and treat patients as they come into the clinic, offering both clinical and emergency care," says longtime paramedic Rick Cartier. "Our expanding scope of practice makes it possible for us to provide chronic disease management, treatment plans, vaccinations and even lab services."

“Increased collaboration between home care and paramedicine services means more rural patients with non-urgent care needs can be assessed and treated at home without having to travel long distance by ambulance to the nearest hospital.”

- Carol Duncan

Cartier says his new role is part of a pilot project introduced in September 2010. This pilot project is aimed at relieving a potential nursing shortage at the Rainbow Lake health clinic.

"When a nurse practitioner needs time off and there's no one to backfill, the clinic runs the risk of shutting down," says the 20-year paramedic practitioner. "We're basically functioning at the same level as a nurse practitioner while remaining within our regulated scope of practice."

In Alberta, paramedic practitioners must be registered with the Alberta College of Paramedics to legally practice paramedicine. They are required to continually monitor and enhance their individual competencies within the profession's growing scope of practice.

"Out here, I'd say we use about 90 per cent of our scope of practice," says Cartier.

INTEGRATED HEALTH SERVICES

Rainbow Lake is just one example of evolutionary pre-hospital care in Alberta. Paramedics work in increasingly diverse settings such as municipal ambulance services, fire and rescue departments, air ambulance services, hospitals, long-term care settings, ski hills and rodeos. They also provide industrial medical services such as oil field standbys.

Carol Duncan is an integrated home care area manager based out of the Canmore Hospital.

"From my perspective, the door is just beginning to open in the area of integrated pre-hospital care," says Duncan.

"Increased collaboration between home care and paramedicine services means more rural patients with non-urgent care needs can be assessed and treated at home without having to travel long distance by ambulance to the nearest hospital."

Duncan says home care is focusing on a case management model of care—a collaborative, person-centred strategy to provide quality health and support services through more efficient use of available resources.

"What we need to work toward is expanding this practice across other health sectors, including paramedicine," says Duncan. "With an ever-increasing scope of practice in the paramedic profession, there are real benefits to collaborating with paramedic practitioners to enhance palliative care services in rural centres. The goal is to establish more community partnerships, as we simply don't have access to the same range of services and resources as in urban settings."

Rural hospital settings are also realizing the benefits of onsite paramedic services.

In 2010, the Northwest Health Centre in High Level contracted two paramedics to assist nursing and medical staff in the

emergency department. The pair got to use skills not often required on a day-to-day basis in the field. Now, all three levels of paramedic practitioner—emergency medical responder, emergency medical technician and emergency medical technologist-paramedic—assist in various departments at the High Level Hospital. As time allows outside of regular calls, emergency medical services staff spend an average of 20 hours a week at the hospital. This project is proving to be quite successful and is expected to be introduced in a growing number of rural hospital locations across Alberta.

Paramedic Rick Cartier welcomes the shift.

"It's definitely made me a better practitioner," says Cartier. "You can't help but pick up a lot working alongside doctors and nurse practitioners in an active team environment. The shared knowledge is invaluable."

REGULATED PROFESSIONALS

No matter what corner of the province they work, Alberta's paramedics are trusted to deliver expert health care when it's needed most. The Alberta College of Paramedics ensures its regulated practitioners stand for the highest quality of patient care, always.

The Alberta College of Paramedics is a self-governing body designated under the *Health Disciplines Act*. The college governs and regulates the paramedic profession in the public interest, including establishing national labour mobility standards for out-of-province practitioners and conducting professional conduct hearings. The College also sets program approval standards for the various educational programs across Alberta to maintain the highest standards in practitioner education. To learn more, visit www.collegeofparamedics.org.

