



New Brunswick Repo Man Looks to Take Back his Health After COPD Diagnosis

Chris Burden, 69, calls himself a road warrior. He's based in Fredericton, New Brunswick, but constantly travels for his work as a bailiff, process server, appraiser and auctioneer. So part of his job is seizing assets due to court rulings and unpaid bills. "I'm a repo man," he says.

Cars, trucks, boats, equipment, houses – you name it, Burden has taken it back. He has been doing it for about 30 years and works 60 hours a week, hitting the highways and byways across the Maritimes. After being diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), one of his first thoughts was that he wasn't going to let it derail his life.

"I said to my doctor 'If you think I'm retiring you're crazy. You know how many roads I've been on? I'm going to hit them all! That means I'm going to keep working and keep doing things. I'm not going to sit home and die on the couch. That's for when I'm 95,'" says Burden.

COPD includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema, where progressive lung damage makes breathing difficult. A conservative estimate finds that about 800,000 Canadians live with COPD. People with advanced COPD are among the highest users of Canada's hospital resources. Among chronic diseases, COPD is the number one reason for hospitalizations in Canada, accounting for the largest number of inpatient admissions from emergency departments and readmissions.

Burden noticed a problem about five years ago. Breathing was becoming more and more of a chore. His morning routine took an hour, just getting from bed to the bathroom to wash up, shave and shower. "It was just a killer," he says.

He figured something was wrong with his lungs. It took time to get a handle on it. Burden went to a clinic (he had no family doctor at the time), but didn't get a definitive diagnosis. As his attacks continued, Burden bounced around between clinics, trying various puffers. Eventually he found a family doctor, was diagnosed with COPD and saw a specialist.

Burden has never smoked (nor had his wife). Though smoking can lead to COPD, not everyone who gets COPD is a smoker. He did think "why me?," but got over that quickly. "I said 'How are we going to deal with it? What's the best I can do?'"

For people like Burden, a program called INSPIRED is a vital support. It offers self-management education, action plans, psychosocial and spiritual care support around COPD, as well as advance care planning.

In 2014-15, the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement (CFHI) supported 19 teams from healthcare organizations across Canada to adapt and adopt INSPIRED from Capital Health (now part of the Nova Scotia Health Authority), where it was developed. Horizon Health Network in New Brunswick has been a big part of the program and is now participating in its expansion with CFHI and health systems in five other provinces to bring INSPIRED to an additional 2300 people living with advanced COPD across up to 39 hospitals and 13 primary healthcare organizations.

An independent analysis showed that scaling up this COPD outreach to all Canadians who could benefit would save \$688 million in hospital costs over five years. For every \$1 invested in the program, \$21 in hospital-based costs could be prevented.

So far, COPD hasn't slowed Burden down much. With assistance, he figured out which puffers work best and what aggravates his breathing. Every day he takes a pill, which has helped. And he joined a class for people with COPD, to learn more about managing the condition.

"Peer support and learning from each other about what small changes can be made to improve quality of life is important," says Kathy Kowalski, Director of Electrodiagnostics and Respiratory Therapy, Horizon Health Network.

She says for Horizon Health the most valuable part of INSPIRED is providing patients with the knowledge and skills to look after their disease without being dependent on the healthcare system.

For instance, an action plan includes things like defining the patient's "personal normal", when and how to adjust medication and take care of themselves. "We make sure they feel empowered," says Kowalski.

Burden does. For now, he says he's doing just fine. "I can outwork two 20-year-olds!" He shared his story as part of a COPD awareness campaign developed by Horizon Health Network in partnership with Vitalité Health Network and funded by the Department of Health. For anyone diagnosed with COPD, Burden says getting connected to resources like INSPIRED is critical.

"You think if you can't breathe life is over. No, it's not over. You have to push, get information and find the right people who can help."