



# Innovative Approach to Patient Engagement Takes Root in Alberta

## The Problem

As a champion for patient and family engagement, Tracy Wasylak, Vice-President, Strategic Networks at Alberta Health Services (AHS) and her colleagues from the University of Calgary understood the potential that patient engagement holds for improving health outcomes. She was also aware of the absence of the patient voice within key service delivery groups at Alberta Health Services, in particular the organization's Bone and Joint Health Strategic Clinical Network (BJHSCN). The research team consisting of Dr. Nancy Marlett, Dr. Deborah Marshall and Dr. Tom Noseworthy sought to remedy this within the BJHSCN. Wasylak notes, "in general, engaged patients are more likely to make active efforts to participate in disease prevention, screening and health promotion activities. Informed, empowered patients more effectively engage in productive interaction with prepared, educated healthcare practice teams."

## The Solution

For her CFHI-supported improvement project undertaken in collaboration between AHS and the University of Calgary, Wasylak and her team outlined two strategies to enhance patients' experience and outcomes. The first focused on building the capacity of patients to engage confidently in a meaningful dialogue with clinicians and decision-makers within the Strategic Clinical Networks (SCNs). For the second, she sought the best way to enhance the relationships and the readiness for patient engagement uptake. She and the team applied a new approach called Patient Engagement Research (PER) consisting

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*"The Patient Engagement Researchers have enhanced our care community in tangible ways. Individuals involved in the experience have developed both the self-confidence and competence to be more meaningfully engaged in the negotiations of healthcare policy.*

*– Tracy Wasylak, Vice-President,  
Strategic Clinical Networks,  
Alberta Health Services*

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of training citizens living with various health conditions (or their family caregivers) to design and conduct health research, using specifically adapted methods of qualitative inquiry. PERs collaborate with health professionals and researchers and engage other patients in research. Wasylak and team brought together a group of local citizens living with chronic osteoarthritis with the goal of involving them fully in the improvement effort to improve osteoarthritis care. In AHS, PERs began to collaborate with health professionals, policy makers and researchers and engaged other patients in research. From the outset of a project, they are fully engaged in all phases of research from setting agendas, funding and implementation through to the uptake of research suggestions. Wasylak's goal was to develop and test

this new model of capacity building and engagement with the BJHSCN and show how PERs could be deployed and engaged in decision making in a meaningful way.

## The Impact

The innovative PER approach has proven effective and has been embraced by many organizations in Alberta, including AHS, academic partners and community groups. Since its launch in 2011, 22 patient researchers have been trained and nine have been part of the Strategic Clinical Networks – participating in core committees and working groups.

As Wasylak and her team predicted, PERs are able to engage large groups of patients and promote the patient's active role in their own health and healthcare. To the delight of everyone involved, the PER initiative has taken root through the newly established Program of Patient and Community Engagement Research (PACER) housed at the University of Calgary. PACER is part of the Institute for Public Health – a collaboration with the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies Program and the Faculty of Medicine. The ground-breaking PACER program is being rolled out within the Institute for Public Health and there have been requests for further collaborations with other universities, research groups and primary care networks to use PERs in their work.



Tracy Wasylak, Vice-President,  
Strategic Clinical Networks,  
Alberta Health Services

**To learn more about CFHI's patient and family engagement initiatives, please visit: [cfhi-fcass.ca/patientengagement](http://cfhi-fcass.ca/patientengagement) or email us at [info@cfhi-fcass.ca](mailto:info@cfhi-fcass.ca).**

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