Patient Navigation in Stressful Times: How Patient Navigators can help

By: Program Director for the Patient Navigation Certificates (Level 1 & 2) at HLLN

Since the late 1990s, patient navigation has been a term used to describe a specific role in healthcare, to support patients and their families in dealing with medical diagnosis and the need to access care in a timely manner. The role developed in the U.S. cancer-care setting, but has evolved fairly rapidly to cover other sectors of care as well as other types of issues, such as heart disease, diabetes and mental health.

The Patient Navigation Certificate Program offered through HLLN is focused on the broader perspective of the role of navigator across sectors (community as well as hospital) and populations—since participants in the courses are often dealing with implementing a new role, or evolving an existing one. While we discuss how the role can be best used, we pay attention to the changing demographic of our population—that includes marginalized individuals, individuals with both chronic physical and mental illness, those who are new to Canada as immigrants or refugees, First Nations peoples, as well as those who live in isolation and frail old age.
And now, in our Certificate Program, we are incorporating how the role of patient navigator can help decrease the impact of the global pandemic on our population, as well as offering the program in an on-line/virtual format, as a responsible approach to providing a quality learning experience in the changing environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have potentially far-reaching impact on our social, cultural, educational and economic structures, as well as delivery/utilization of healthcare resources. At the moment, Canadians are working hard to “flatten the curve” of the virus’ impact. The purpose of this action is to essentially buy time in the healthcare system, so our nurses, doctors and other care providers/systems are not as overwhelmed as we have seen occur in other countries, where the stressors on hospitals (in particular) have been severe.

**Patient Navigators**, effectively deployed, can provide an essential strategy in the health-care team effort in making sure Canadians have timely access to appropriate care in this Navigators are excellent communicators; they are connected to resources in the community as well as links in hospital programs/systems. Individuals who need services, but are now in isolation, quarantine or socially distancing, can benefit from the contact with a patient navigator, to ensure they are able to access what they require to maintain their health. As well, a “check-in” with a patient navigator, can decrease the level of stress experienced by many people during this pandemic. Financial insecurity, access to food and medications, physical isolation from family and friends, as well as staying home with children (who are now out of school) ... all of these experiences add to the anxiety and stress that are characteristics of chronic conditions or a new diagnosis.

As a Patient Navigator, you can contribute to improving outcomes and quality of life for those in your community, for your patients—by adding a dimension to the role that enables virtual communication to provide that important liaison between patient and the healthcare system they are dealing with. There is an important place for both healthcare professional and lay navigators to address the challenges faced in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.