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Cardiac education series improves heart health for rural communities

Doreen Byers was on the front nine of the golf course at Salmon Arm in June and she was getting weaker...and weaker...and weaker. She realized something was terribly wrong.

It was a heart attack and Byers was rushed to her local hospital and then to the Interior Heart and Surgical Centre in Kelowna for angioplasty, where a stent was inserted to restore blood flow to her heart.

Byer's condition also led to a referral to a rural cardiac education program provided through video-conferencing to a growing number of communities in Interior Health.

Central Okanagan Association for Cardiac Health (COACH) piloted these education sessions with support from Interior Health's Regional Cardiac program from June 2016 to March 2017 in Salmon Arm, Trail, Grand Forks, Merritt, and Williams Lake, supporting more than 120 rural cardiac patients.

Based on the learnings provided by the successful pilot, the COACH education series has now expanded to Creston, Kimberley, Invermere and Golden.

"Video-conferencing is another great example of how health authorities are finding innovative ways to take advantage of existing technology to support patients in their own communities," says Health Minister Adrian Dix. "This program provides valuable information that can have lasting positive impacts and I'm pleased to see Creston, Kimberley, Invermere and Golden patients have the option to receive it locally."

The goal of the video-conferencing education sessions is to improve overall health and promote lifestyle choices that reduce the risk of future cardiac events and to do so in a way that reduces the need for patients to travel long distances.

"Heart attacks create stress on patients and families and Interior Health is focused on helping reduce this stress by supporting patients with services that meet their needs effectively, efficiently and conveniently. This video-conferencing education enables patients to access important supports and make lifestyle changes without dealing with the additional stress of traveling long distances to larger sites," says IH Board Chair Dr. Doug Cochrane.

Patients who participated in the pilot were pleased with the information they received and the new skills they learned for self-managing their heart disease. Byers says her health and general approach to life have changed dramatically thanks to what she learned through this education.

"I found it to be absolutely invaluable for my knowledge and helping me get through my issues and managing my life. It completely changed everything," says Byers. "I'm eating extremely healthy; I've joined a local exercise program; I've lost a ton of weight."

Sessions are open to individuals with a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease (heart attack, heart failure, etc.) and those who are considered high risk for cardiovascular disease. Previously, rural residents had limited support in their communities for cardiac rehabilitation.

“Cardiac rehabilitation is an important part of patient recovery in reducing the progression of this chronic disease. COACH is glad to extend the education series in a cost-effective manner as the prevalence of heart disease continues to grow,” says cardiologist and COACH medical director, Dr. K.J. Pistawka.

Patients can attend any of the education sessions covering six general topics: heart anatomy and procedures, cardiac risk factors, exercise guidelines, heart healthy eating, medication and stress management.

All sessions are supported by health care professionals ranging from exercise physiologists to pharmacists to dieticians, and give participants the opportunity to ask questions about their individual circumstances and needs. The program also fosters a group-learning environment where patients can gain valuable insight from fellow participants.

Sessions run on a six-week rotation, and patients can start with any topic and choose which sessions they want to attend. Family members or caregivers are encouraged to join patients at the sessions so that they are better equipped to support their loved ones.

“This is a great opportunity for COACH’s multi-disciplinary team of educators with decades of experience in cardiac rehabilitation to extend their expertise to rural cardiac residents in need,” says COACH program coordinator Jacqueline Gabelhouse.

Video-conferencing equipment was already in place at the five IH rural locations, and the Kelowna General Hospital Foundation generously donated \$10,000 to COACH for additional video-conferencing equipment at the Kelowna site.

For more information about the video-conferencing education sessions in Trail, Grand Forks, Merritt, Salmon Arm, Williams Lake, Creston, Kimberley, Invermere and Golden, call COACH at 250-763-3433. A physician referral is required for the program, but COACH will help patients with this process.

Byers has done five individual COACH sessions and has a final one scheduled for December.

“I would recommend COACH to anybody – they answer all your questions before you even ask them,” says Byers.

Central Okanagan Association for Cardiac Health is a non-profit society dedicated to reducing cardiovascular risk factors and enhancing the health of individuals in the Central Okanagan.

Interior Health is committed to promoting healthy lifestyles and providing a wide range of quality health-care services to more than 740,000 people living across B.C.’s vast interior. For more information, visit www.interiorhealth.ca, follow us on Twitter [@Interior_Health](https://twitter.com/Interior_Health), or like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/InteriorHealth.