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SOS SHARING
OUR STORIES

Tsucwmínte (welcome) Aboriginal employees

Interior Health sets goal to add 1,200 Aboriginal employees to workforce by 2025

The patient from a First Nations community was in pain and frightened. The faces around him at the hospital were unfamiliar and although the hospital staff members were kind, they couldn't reassure him that he was in safe hands.

As he became more agitated, a call was made to Aboriginal Patient Navigator (APN) Deb Donald. She arrived quickly and immediately introduced herself as a member of the Simpcw First Nation. The man settled down and she was able to convince him that he needed an X-ray before he could be scheduled for surgery.

"His anxiety also eased up when he saw a security officer who was Aboriginal. Familiar identifying factors made him feel more comfortable and that's why it's so important to encourage Aboriginal people toward careers in health care," says Deb.

Deb works at Royal Inland Hospital (RIH) in Kamloops, which sees many Aboriginal patients from First Nation communities across IH West and also Métis patients in urban neighbourhoods.

"We have Aboriginal employees at RIH, but I wish there were more. I would like to see a solid representation in housekeeping, security, food and porter services, as well as nurses, Allied Health and physicians."

Cariboo Memorial Hospital Health Services Director Lori Boothby agrees. Her Williams Lake hospital serves a large population of Aboriginal people from the three First Nations located across the Cariboo-Chilcotin.

"Increasing our Aboriginal employee complement is a priority and our managers know it is a priority. Interior Health Aboriginal Recruiter Carrie Desjarlais has met with our managers and is supporting them in recruitment efforts."

Lori says it's really a matter of common sense for an organization.

"No matter what the population is, you want to make sure the staff and people who take care of the patients are reflected in that population."

Health Minister Adrian Dix says it's becoming increasingly clear that it is necessary to create an environment that provides culturally appropriate care that is supportive of all patients. "The progress we have made so far is good, and I acknowledge that the targets set are ambitious but necessary. This

approach is part of a broader strategy in which health authorities work closely with the First Nations Health Authority and other partners to improve cultural safety and humility across the health-care system.”

Mal Griffin, VP of Human Resources, says Interior Health has launched a recruitment strategy focusing on attracting Aboriginal people to health-care careers. Senior leadership has set a goal to increase the number of IH employees identifying as having Aboriginal heritage from the current number of 3.93 to 10 per cent by 2025.

Cariboo Memorial staff got a reminder of how much they rely on the knowledge of Aboriginal staff when there was a six-month vacancy in the hospital’s Aboriginal patient navigator position.

“When I took our new APN Harriet Hird around on her first day last month, the staff members were ecstatic because they regularly encounter situations where they need the expertise, guidance, and wisdom that can only come from a person who is First Nations or Métis ,” says Lori.

The wife of a stroke patient at RIH was able to compare two separate experiences, one with the support of Aboriginal staff and one without.

Deborah Wilson-Green, who is from the Haisla First Nation, says it made such a difference to her when she was able to turn to APN Deb for support. Although she has worked in both education and health centres, she felt she was in a maze the first time her husband had a stroke. She said while the staff members were competent and kind, they were too busy helping patients to be able to provide other necessary supports to family members.

When Larry Green had a second stroke, Deborah was connected to Deb and the whole experience was different. Deb helped her find community supports that allowed her to stay close to her husband – she and Larry live in Ashcroft – and she offered guidance about his in-hospital care.

“Deb was just a wealth of information. I was so thankful to have her there to help me deal with the ‘life’ issues so I could support my husband 100 per cent in his recovery.”

Deborah says it’s not easy for people unacquainted with the Aboriginal culture to understand certain things that are important to First Nations and Métis families.

“When someone is ill in our culture, we go support the family so huge numbers of people show up at the hospital and nurses struggle to understand that. Aboriginal nurses get it though. They know that’s just how we do it in the Aboriginal world and they find a spare area or room for the family and friends to wait.”

Deb says she finds her non-Aboriginal colleagues at Royal Inland eager to learn about their Aboriginal patients because they want to make their stay more comfortable.

“I really welcome their questions, but I am just one person. Other Aboriginal employees bring the same knowledge.”

She's also not afraid to explain when she hears comments that might hurt an Aboriginal patient. She recalled one of her patients telling her she was offended to hear nurses talking about having a "powwow" about something.

In those cases, it's unintentional harm and Deb helps her colleagues understand why it's important to think about their words.

"I am really happy at how the culture has changed here over the years."

She adds the ability to offer culturally safe care will continue to improve as more Aboriginal employees join the IH workforce and are able to share their culture with their colleagues.

SIDEBAR:

Bringing his heritage to work

Rehabilitation Assistant Garth Wale identifies as a husband, a dad, a brother, a 31-year employee of Interior Health; and a proud member of the Gitxsan First Nation.

He is also a valued team member at Ponderosa Lodge where his calm, kind demeanour makes him a favourite with residents. At least seven times in the space of 10 minutes, a confused resident interrupts him and each time his response is as genuine as the first one.

"I love working here," he says.

Garth worked in Purchasing at Overlander Residential Care for many years and then moved to Logistics at Royal Inland Hospital. Nine years ago, he decided he wanted to try something different so he took the rehabilitation assistant course. He completed his internship at RIH, but when a job came up at Ponderosa, it proved to be the perfect fit.

"I like elderly people and I enjoy getting to know them and meeting their families."

This job also appeals to his interest in physical activity. His whole family is sports-minded, playing all different sports. Garth's passions were hockey and volleyball, which he played well into adulthood, although he has traded in the skates and court shoes to spend more time with his two young sons.

Garth was born in Hazelton and although his family eventually moved to Kamloops, they returned north every summer to spend time with relatives and take part in traditional pastimes, including a lot of salmon fishing.

Over the years, he has seen more Aboriginal staff start to populate the IH workforce and he is hopeful it will continue.

"I think it's great to see the recognition of Aboriginal culture as a positive component for health care. It's important for First Nations and Métis people to realize they can succeed in these careers. If they see more Aboriginal people working at health-care sites, they may be inclined to try it," says Garth.

One of his four brothers is a nurse practitioner who works with the Iskut community in the Stikine country of northwestern B.C.

His own background is diverse with his dad coming from the Gitksan First Nation and his mom an Irish Canadian.

“Growing up in that environment, you appreciate ethnicity and diversity, which also makes a workplace better.”

Garth sees firsthand the difference his Indigenous heritage can have on making a First Nations elder feel more comfortable when he or she first arrives at Ponderosa. He also appreciates being able to call on Aboriginal Patient Navigator Cassie Michell in situations where families need a little extra support.

He believes that expanding the Aboriginal workforce in Interior Health will bring only positive benefits to both patients and staff, as cultural sensitivity becomes something that is second nature to everyone in all levels of jobs.

Photo Captions:

Photo 1: Aboriginal Patient Navigator Deb Donald speaks with Secwepemc patient Debbara Toney about her care plan for when she goes home from hospital.

Photo 2: Garth Wale is a rehabilitation assistant at Ponderosa Lodge in Kamloops and a member of the Gitksan First Nation.