



St. Joseph's hospital raises awareness of seniors' services

LISA RAINFORD

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Given that seniors are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, it's no wonder St. Joseph's Health Centre is seeing more and more seniors come through its emergency room doors.

As part of Seniors' Month, an annual celebration that recognizes and honours the contributions seniors make each June, the hospital is taking the opportunity to raise awareness of all the services it provides this age group.

Ontario's population aged 65 and older is projected to more than double from 1.8 million or 13.7 per cent of the population in 2009 to 4.1 million or 23.2 per cent in 2036, according to the provincial government. The growth in seniors' share of the population will accelerate after 2011 as baby boomers begin to turn 65 years of age.

"Absolutely," replied Stella Cruz, the Geriatric Emergency Management (GEM) nurse at St. Joseph's, when asked if the hospital has been seeing an increase of seniors in its emergency room over recent years. "More seniors are sicker, they're taking more medication. There's a focus on staying at home longer, but there are more health issues, more medications to deal with."

Geriatric care is a priority for St. Joseph's Health Centre, as is launching innovative programs crucial to finding new ways to care for the growing number of seniors in the city's west end.

The GEM nurse is the first of these innovative resources frail seniors will meet when arriving at the health centre's emergency room if they are determined to be at high risk following a screening.

"Many seniors don't know of the resources available to them," said Cruz. "Some of them don't even have family physicians. They use the ER instead. It's a struggle to keep them as healthy and independent as possible."

There are five components that staff is keeping its eyes on when screening a patient, including failure to cope, difficulty managing medications, if the senior lives alone, has a history of falls or decreased mobility.

"Many patients I see have more than one of these issues that needs to be addressed," said Cruz.

Cruz, a GEM nurse at St. Joseph's for a year and a half, works with the entire team in the emergency department: physicians, nurses, a social worker and the Toronto Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) coordinator. She enhances the team's ability to develop well-rounded intervention plans for patients so they can return home safely.

"Most don't realize they need help," said Cruz. "Many believe cognitive impairment is something that happens when they get old - no, it's not."

Cruz gets referrals from everyone from the EMS driver to the ER physician to the nurse who has done her initial assessment.

"It's a real collaborative effort," she said.

Seniors need to know there's a lot of resources available to them.

"If they have any concerns, they need to seek medical attention, they need to know that there's supports in place," said Cruz. "We need to identify the issues early so we can treat the geriatric syndrome appropriately."

An effective GEM nurse knows what is available to patients and families and helps coordinate the right services for them.

"As an organization, our commitment to our elderly patient population is exceptional and really aimed at supporting our commitment to Putting Patients First by providing the safest care," said Cruz.

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