

Better ‘SAFE’ than sorry is the motto of Michelle Acorn, NP-Adult

An elderly woman, Edith and her daughter Amanda (not their real names) walk slowly through the doors of Lakeridge Health Corporation’s Specialized Assessment of the Frail Elderly (SAFE) Clinic. This is not the first visit for Edith to Lakeridge; usually she ends up in the emergency department after a fall. There, she is evaluated and discharged only to return when it happens again. They are hoping this visit will be different. As Amanda helps her mother with her coat, the pair is greeted by the nurse practitioner leading the clinic, Michelle Acorn.

This is Edith’s first visit to the SAFE Clinic after being referred by a nurse specializing in geriatric medicine and an emergency physician. Fear, insecurity, and apprehension can be seen in Edith’s eyes as she follows Michelle with her walker to the consult area.

Michelle and her physiotherapist partner, Laura McLeod, sit with Edith and Amanda. They talk about Edith’s life and current health, and Michelle answers every question they have. Together, they form a plan. At the end of the visit, Amanda seems more relaxed, thanking Michelle and Laura. The biggest change, however, is in Edith. The fear and apprehension has been replaced by a sense of confidence because she knows more about her condition and medication. Edith and Amanda realize this visit is different: there is a plan and someone to follow-up with.

This type of consult is all in a day’s work for Michelle.

In the SAFE clinic, her role enables Michelle to provide comprehensive geriatric assessments and management for high risk, frail older adults who are at risk of falling. Health issues targeted include cognition, continence, and polypharmacy. The clinic opened in January 2008, and now, more than 350 patients receive comprehensive geriatric assessment and treatment at the clinic.

Michelle described the clinic team. “We consult, partner, link and navigate with all of the specialty geriatric services including my physician partner, a neuropsychologist, an occupational therapist, a pharmacist, home care, Alzheimer’s First Link and Cardiac and Respiratory Rehabilitation,”

Dr. Park, physician leader of the SAFE program talked about the added benefits of having the nurse practitioners in the SAFE clinic: “Physicians training is different from that of a nurse practitioner. Our focus tends to be organ specific, say a focus on cardiac issues, and we spend less time on the individual as a whole and how they function in the community. The nurses spend a lot of time with the patient and family and how they manage in the community. That focus, when combined with the disease that’s afflicting this patient, has been to the advantage of everybody, especially the patient. Nurse practitioners tend to have a more holistic approach to managing patients.”

Michelle’s days are filled with patients who are afraid of falling, reluctant to discuss memory loss and fearful of losing their independence. Some have had multiple trips to the emergency department for the same unresolved issue. “The SAFE clinic becomes the critical linkage between the hospital, community and practitioners who are often overwhelmed with the complexity and time required to care for this vulnerable population.”

During a consult, Michelle may make changes to a patient's medications, or initiate a new medication to manage a chronic disease or illness. After the initial consult, patients return to discuss progress or new concerns. This includes ensuring the medication changes are effective, their lab work is normal and their mental and physical health has improved.

Michelle said her background has helped prepare her for her role, and the patient sees the benefits. "I get to work independently and in partnership with other health care providers, and most importantly, the patient and their family," she said. "Collaboration with all other necessary health care professionals means optimal care is delivered."

The nurse practitioner role has been instrumental in helping vulnerable groups of people maintain their quality of life at home and has decreased stress on other aspects of the health care system in Ontario. "It is always better to be 'SAFE' than sorry, and I think it's fair to say the patients and families of this clinic would agree."