

Breaking New Ground in Canada and around the world; meet one of the NPs at Ontario's First NP-Led Clinic – Jennifer Fournier, NP-Primary Health Care

Whether it's preventing falls among the elderly, educating new parents on baby-proofing their home, or identifying a life-threatening disease before it's too late, nurse practitioner Jennifer Fournier does it all. And it's all in a day's work.

“It is challenging work and it's fast-paced, but I really enjoy it,” said Jennifer. “Family practice changes every day. You just never know what the next patient is going to have or need.”

Jennifer works at the Sudbury District Nurse Practitioner Clinics, the first NP-led clinic in Canada. She is one of six NPs working at this innovative health care clinic which opened in 2007, increasing access to care for thousands of residents with no regular health care provider. Each NP provides complete primary health care to their own caseload of patients, some of whom may not have seen a health care provider for years. They work collaboratively with family physicians and other health professionals such as a pharmacist.

In this clinic, Jennifer practices to her full scope. During a typical day, she conducts physical assessments, orders diagnostic tests, and prescribes medications. She also monitors chronic disease and illnesses among her patients on a regular basis, who range in age from two days old to 96 years of age.

While Jennifer says an average day starts out full of appointments, oftentimes she will see patients who have called in and require an immediate consult. It's this willingness to help and flexibility that makes a difference for the patients.

Last year, a young patient came to the clinic because of problems swallowing. Jennifer did a comprehensive assessment, ordered several diagnostic tests and consulted with other members of the health care team. When the results indicated cancer, Jennifer directed the patient to a regional cancer care centre for treatment. Because of the increased access to care from the NP-led clinic and Jennifer's early intervention, the prognosis is favourable.

“She thanks me every time she sees me for saving her life. Had she not come into the clinic, the cancer might not have been addressed,” Jennifer said.

Besides caring for and following up with patients' health, Jennifer's role includes another integral part. “We do a lot of education. For example, we have some new parents that come in who are looking for education about making their home safer for their new family.” As well as providing education, she also links patients to resources in the community such as Meals on Wheels, Diabetes Education Centre, the YMCA or the Alzheimer's Society.

In addition to her role at the clinic, Jennifer and her NP colleagues regularly travel five hours to spend four days in Chapleau, performing breast exams, pap smears and other necessary exams and tests for women who do not otherwise have access to these services. Community volunteers work with Jennifer and her colleagues to ensure the results return to them so issues can be addressed and treated.

While the NP-led clinic increased access to health care for the Sudbury and District area residents, as well as patients in neighbouring communities, this is only the beginning. The McGuinty government has announced funding for 25 NP-led clinics, slated to open in the next two years.

As for now, Jennifer says this clinic is a step in the right direction to improve access to care and maximize the value of NPs. “This clinic has proven to have a positive impact on the patients,” said Jennifer. “We can’t solve the whole problem with one clinic, but more clinics and more providers to keep the growth growing in primary health care will.”