

Get on the van with Don Hutchinson, NP-PHC

The day begins like any other, and while most health care providers are getting ready to head to their clinics, nurse practitioner Don Hutchinson is taking the clinic to his patients!

Don and his colleagues from the Mobile Unit Team load up the NorWest Community Health Centre's Mobile Unit with medical supplies and head to a small community two hours outside the City of Thunder Bay. Once there, they set up the clinic in an area designated by the local town council – this time right inside the municipal government offices.

For the entire day, Don completes physical assessments, offers immunizations, provides wound care, performs routine blood work, follows patients with chronic diseases and illnesses and prescribes necessary medications. Besides treating each patient's individual health care needs, Don also provides education on topics such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes, through individual appointments and community presentations. Once all the patients have been attended to, Don and the Mobile Unit Team pack up the van and head home.

Don has been a nurse practitioner for 15 years and works at NorWest Community Health Centre (CHC), Thunder Bay site. The centre runs different programs to meet the needs of residents in the area and outlying communities who do not have access to primary health care.

Don visits two different communities every second week. The care provided is done in collaboration with Norwest's physicians who provide care for issues that are beyond the nurse practitioner scope of practice. A foot care nurse and community health worker also work with Don to provide complete care to patients including linking them with resources within the community so they can educate themselves and maintain their mental and physical health between appointments.

Don also looks after another population of patients: incarcerated youth. Twice a week, he works at William W Creighton Youth Services, a youth correctional facility in Thunder Bay. Before Don and his NP colleague began making visits to the facility, young offenders were taken to local hospital emergency rooms with two guards, and waited, often hours, for the routine physical assessment required for all new admissions to the facility.

Since the creation of the program three years ago, Don has made regular trips to the facility, saving time and money for both the health care and correctional systems. A satellite clinic is set up where Don has access to a private exam room complete with the necessary medical supplies and equipment to perform physicals, immunizations and blood work. He works closely with the staff at the facility, including an adolescent psychiatrist, to meet the needs of youth with mental health issues.

“I get to know the kids, and that's one of the benefits in the continuity of care.” Don also educates these teens on a host of health related topics including pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted infections, impacts of smoking and substance abuse, as well as the benefits of staying in school.

When he's not providing outreach care to youth at Creighton or visiting neighbouring communities, Don works at NorWest's Thunder Bay site as part of the clinical team providing care to patients of diverse backgrounds and ages. He even does home visits to assess and follow up with patients who are unable to make it to the clinic.

While working in many different places and many different communities might be overwhelming to some people, for Don it's all in a day's work and he wouldn't change a thing. "I like being able to help people see what their health needs are," he said. "It is rewarding to help patients who have been struggling with an illness, disease or addiction and to be part of a team that helps to care for them."