

Canopy Health: Nurse Practitioners and Midwives Collaborating to Improve Primary Care Access

Now more than ever, British Columbians are seeking robust, inclusive, and accessible health care services for their families. Canopy Health located in Lynn Valley Village, North Vancouver, features a collaboration of Nurse Practitioners (NPs) and Registered Midwives (RMs) among additional allied health professionals, seeking to provide British Columbian families with just that – fulsome and attainable health care services in the centre of the community for patients and their families throughout their health journeys.

In late 2022, Colleen Fulton, RM, Erin Gray, NP(F), and Eliza Henshaw, DNP, NP(F) put forth the blueprint for the province's first Nurse Practitioner/Registered Midwife-led clinic model, whereby patients and their families would experience seamless transitions between perinatal and family primary care, as well as easy access to a host of allied health care services. Fulton, Gray and Henshaw acknowledged the current gaps in today's health system and generated a truly innovative clinic model where nursing and midwifery works together to address needs and establish lifelong care services at the core of the community.

"It is very exciting to see nurse practitioners and midwives come together in such an innovative way to address our communities' health care needs," said Sherri Kensall, Board Chair of the Association of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of BC (NNPBC). "We know that in order to make wholesale changes to our health system, we need to utilize nurses, nurse practitioners, midwives, and all health professionals to their fullest potential, and institute more of these types of nursing- and midwifery-led, team-based collaborations where health professionals share their expertise and work together to produce the best possible patient outcomes."

Canopy Health is the first clinic of its kind in BC and expects to attract 3000 families over the next three years with possibility for further growth. Canopy provides an excellent duplicable model that can be used elsewhere in the province and beyond, to meet community health needs, matching patients with primary health care providers.

Full Spectrum Health Services

At Canopy, patients have unencumbered access to primary care professionals who can provide them with the specialized health care services they need, at any point in their life, right as they need them. With four NPs and six midwives currently on the team and hoping to grow in future, Canopy offers patients robust health care services.

Decades of health research have consistently demonstrated that Nurse Practitioners deliver exceptional health care and improve access to primary care, helping to reduce pressures on an overburdened health care system. Canopy's team of Family Nurse Practitioners afford a full range of health services to patients at any age. As autonomous health professionals, NPs can assess, monitor, and diagnose patient health and mental health, order and interpret diagnostic tests, prescribe medications, perform in-office procedures, make referrals to specialists, and educate and counsel patients on health, wellness, and lifestyle choices. During a 30-minute visit, NPs can listen and capture patient health care needs or concerns, share resources, and help inform patients and their families about health options.

Canopy's team also currently includes six Registered Midwives, primary care providers with a focus on perinatal health. Midwives work closely with pregnant and postpartum individuals, their children, and families, meeting with patients regularly to ensure fulsome health and safety of the parent and child. Midwives currently attend to approximately 30 percent of all pregnancies in BC – it is within their role to assess and monitor patient health, order tests, counsel and support patients through labour and newborn care, and make referrals to obstetricians and other health professionals as needed.

Canopy Health also offers access to the services of a variety of allied health professionals including but not limited to lactation consulting, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, chiropractic, speech therapy, registered massage, and acupuncture – truly providing patients with a holistic health home at the centre of their community.

Seamless Provision of Care

The collaborative effort of Nurse Practitioners and Registered Midwives working together at Canopy allows BC families the opportunity to access specialized primary care right as they are starting their families, and beyond.

In BC, midwives discharge perinatal patients from their care at six weeks postpartum, with the expectation that the patient and newborn will transition into family primary care by eight weeks to conduct the necessary labs and tests, and to monitor overall health. This transition is key in the lives of both the parent and the newborn, both of which face emergent care needs.

In 2023, 100 percent of Canopy midwives' unattached patients are now currently discharged into care with a Nurse Practitioner – ensuring vital continuity of care. It is estimated that approximately 20 percent of postpartum patients do not already have a primary care provider to continue to provide health care services or to conduct newborn examinations within a critical timeframe, and this number is growing. Vulnerable patients were left without direct care, advised to seek out health care in emergency rooms and via the 8-1-1 hotline. Through this interdisciplinary collaboration, practitioners ensure seamless continuity of care prior to discharge. Additionally, birthing families who currently see one of Canopy's NPs can be directly transitioned to the care of a midwife at the time they require perinatal services.

"Together we can provide the best quality care through this team-based model," said Colleen Fulton, RM, Canopy Health Midwifery Director. "At Canopy, we can collaborate in a highly robust way, attaching patients, alleviating one another's case loads, and creating the strongest, most evidence-based practice for families in our community."

"We're so grateful for the service that midwives provide families and the continuity of care they receive during pregnancy, labour, and post-natal," said Bernice Budz, Executive Director of the Midwives Association of British Columbia (MABC). "To continue to receive the best care for their families, this collaboration between midwives and nurse practitioners addresses a critical need in being able to access a primary care provider after they are discharged. This first-of-its-kind program is an excellent partnership, a model we hope to see applied more broadly and that will serve patient and family needs very well."

Holistic Family Health

Presently, Canopy Health is home to a growing team of four Nurse Practitioners and six Registered Midwives, and expects to become the holistic, health care home for 3000 families over the next three years.

"Canopy provides a health care home for vulnerable populations in our community, including pregnant individuals and young families," said Erin Gray, NP(F), Canopy Health NP Director. "Accessible, end-to-end primary care is important. At Canopy, we can meet their needs all in one place, and maintain relationships with patients and their families throughout the course of their lives."

For patients who access Canopy's midwifery services, care is also available to members of their family including their children, partners, and parents. "Through our team's collaboration at Canopy, we are providing a unique way for British Columbians to access primary care. We can see patients at any stage in life, at any complexity," Gray noted.

It is through this type of community-based holistic approach that British Columbians can experience the high-quality care that interdisciplinary teams offer, and the much-needed continuity of care that will help to alleviate burdens downstream in our health system. Particularly as our communities continue to face challenges in accessing primary care services, it is through novel and innovative models such as this Nurse Practitioner/Registered Midwife-led clinic and other team-based collaborations that we can best leverage the highly specialized, patient-focused care providers available in BC's health system and ensure that British Columbians and their families receive the care they need.

To learn more about Canopy Health, visit their website at www.canopyhealthbc.ca.