

New Peer Support Program Brings Hope and Healing to Stroke Patients and Their Caregivers at Pembroke Regional Hospital

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In partnership with March of Dimes Canada, the Pembroke Regional Hospital is very pleased to announce the recent launch of *Hospital Peer Connections*, a compassionate and empowering peer support program for stroke patients and their caregivers.

Hospital Peer Connections is a unique in-hospital program developed by March of Dimes Canada that connects stroke survivors and caregivers with trained peer volunteers who have lived experience with stroke. These volunteers offer one-on-one visits to patients and caregivers, providing emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of hope during what can be an overwhelming and uncertain time.

The program is designed to complement clinical care by addressing the emotional and psychological needs of patients and caregivers.

“Peer support is a powerful tool in the recovery journey,” said Michelle Foster, Volunteer Engagement Coordinator at March of Dimes Canada. “When someone who has been through a stroke walks into a hospital room and shares their story, it creates an instant connection. It helps patients and families feel seen, understood, and less alone. Our volunteers are trained, compassionate, and deeply committed to helping others navigate the path to recovery.”

Among the program’s first volunteers is Gary McKay, a stroke and heart attack survivor who joined the program after learning about it at a local stroke education session hosted by the hospital’s Clinical Stroke Educator.

Gary, who experienced a mild stroke in 2019 and spent four days in the hospital’s Rehabilitation unit, emphasizes the importance of positivity and perspective. “I provide encouragement - that there is life after stroke. Everyone’s experience is different. My brother had a stroke two years ago and has some deficits, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. Having a positive attitude is good for any type of recovery and you have to be willing to put in the work to have a positive outcome.”

Though new to the hospital environment, Gary has already found the experience deeply rewarding. “I’ve never done anything like this before, never worked in a hospital,” he shared. “Now I feel like I’m part of the health care team.”

And he added that by doing this, he aims to provide some hope to others who are in their initial stages of their recovery journey.

Volunteers are trained to listen, share their experiences, and guide patients toward additional resources, including the After Stroke program offered by March of Dimes Canada. This

community-based program provides long-term support, system navigation, and case management to help stroke survivors live independently and thrive after discharge.

The visits themselves take place in patient rooms or private spaces within the hospital, and patients can receive multiple visits during their stay. Caregivers can also be referred independently for support.

Currently, PRH has three dedicated peer volunteers. With plans to expand the program, the hospital is actively seeking more volunteers to increase the reach and frequency of visits.

“This program fills a critical gap in care,” said PRH President and CEO Sabine Mersmann who added that patient feedback since the program launched on June 17th has been very positive. “It brings a human connection that clinical care alone can’t always provide. Our patients benefit immensely from hearing firsthand what recovery can look like. It’s inspiring, it’s hopeful, and it’s a testament to the strength of community.”

By bridging the gap between hospital care and community support, *Hospital Peer Connections* strengthens the continuum of care and reinforces PRH’s commitment to treating the whole person - body, mind, and spirit.

For more information or to become a volunteer, please contact Michelle Foster at March of Dimes Canada at (705) 627-7831 or by email at mfoster@marchofdimes.ca.

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