

Pembroke Resident Credits Heart Function Clinic At PRH With Setting Him On A Path To Good Health And Recovery

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PEMBROKE – In his youth, Pembroke resident Phil Gaudette was always active; playing sports in his teens and 20s and pursuing martial arts for nearly two decades.

“I always worked out and kept fit. I stayed that way until I was involved in a head-on collision near Arnprior 10 years ago. As a result I couldn’t do what I was used to doing so I got out of my routine, got busy at work, didn’t eat well or make time for wellness and I gained weight,” Mr. Gaudette said, noting that at his heaviest he was over 300 pounds.

Despite that, Mr. Gaudette continued doing some of the things he enjoyed such as projects around the house. In fact, he was involved in one of those projects two years ago when, newly retired from Canada Post, he jumped off the side of a pick up truck and injured his hip.

“I tried to ‘walk off’ the pain for three months before I was sent to Queensway-Carleton Hospital for an assessment where, four hours later, I was in surgery to replace a fractured hip,” he said.

During the surgery, it was discovered that Mr. Gaudette had atrial fibrillation – an irregular and often rapid heart rate that can increase your risk of stroke, heart failure and other heart-related complications. Having such a condition can result in blood clots and also causes fatigue. It was determined that because of this, Mr. Gaudette’s overall heart function was less than 20 per cent. For several years, Mr. Gaudette said he had felt fatigued but blamed it on the fact that he was getting older and was overweight.

With a confirmed diagnosis, Mr. Gaudette was referred to the Pembroke Regional Hospital’s Heart Function Clinic.

Part of the hospital’s Vascular Health program, the Heart Function Clinic was established in July 2014 for patients who have been diagnosed with recurrent, new and/or suspected heart failure. Staffed by Cardiologist Dr. Ronald Vexler and Registered Nurses Lisa Keon and Annette Gorr, the goal of the clinic is to improve the quality of life and outcomes for patients living with heart failure, significantly reducing the number of readmissions, length of hospital stay, and mortality rates. Referrals are generated through Emergency departments, hospital in-patient units, and family physician offices.

Those referred to the clinic are given rapid access to Dr. Vexler, diagnostic services, health assessments and treatment. In addition, nursing education and counselling about risk factors for vascular disease is provided, along with

referrals to other services if required, ongoing follow-up and support in managing heart failure.

“When the heart can't pump properly, the engine which powers everything we do in life is just not working well. So, our task is to identify the cause and help the patient to get things working normally again. It's certainly more than simply taking a pill. Treating heart failure requires all hands on deck....most importantly, the patient and his/her family,” said Dr. Vexler.

Mr. Gaudette said that Dr. Vexler explained everything really well to him and made it clear that changes had to be made.

“Changing what I was eating was key. I had to cut out the salt in my diet. Nutritional training helped me understand how the body reacts when you are trying to lose weight and having a supportive family has been important,” Mr. Gaudette said.

He noted that he and his wife Ann now rarely eat prepared meals. “We eat a lot of fish, chicken, a bit of pork, beef as a treat – and lot of salad. I now eat three meals a day – good healthy food – and I allow myself a treat every couple of weeks. It's all about portion control and it helps that my wife is a good cook but we had to relearn how to cook by seasoning without salt for instance,” he said.

In conjunction with improved eating habits, Mr. Gaudette also completed a 12-week community-based Vascular Health Exercise Program at the Best Western Fitness Centre and his efforts paid off. “I dropped 85 pounds in about a year and a half. I have about 20-25 more pounds to go, with 190 pounds being my ideal weight. The last bit will take longer but I'm motivated. I walk about 2 hours each day and I go to the gym in the winter.”

A big part of his motivation is family, his grandchildren who range in age from two to 10, and a desire to travel. “I've always wanted to do more travelling. In the last two years alone I've travelled 35,000 km,” he said.

RN Lisa Keon said Mr. Gaudette's willingness to learn ways to manage his heart failure through the Heart Function Clinic assisted him in actively making lifestyle changes to improve his overall health.

“Mr. Gaudette was very motivated and committed to ongoing follow-up and support in our clinic. Some of his lifestyle changes included healthy diet, significant weight loss, and regular routine exercise. As a result, his heart function has improved tremendously from (EF) 25% to 52% (normal EF-55%), requiring less medications, and this has lead to improved quality of life,” Ms. Keon said.

“You have to take advantage of the programs offered and listen to your doctor and the specialists. Everything offered ultimately provided me with the right tools and opportunities but I had to take those forward and do something with them,” Mr. Gaudette said, adding that had he not been referred to the Heart Function Clinic, he may not have found the resources he needed to improve his health.

PRH Vascular Health Coordinator Karen Roosen said the growth in the Heart Function Clinic has been phenomenal.

Since 2015, close to 600 people have been seen which represents a two-and-a-half year growth rate of greater than 50%.

“The Heart Function Clinic is empowering patients to take control through healthy eating, stress management and exercise and we are pleased to see such good patient and system outcomes as a result,” Ms. Roosen said, adding that because of an increase in patients, Dr. Vexler has also increased his monthly availability for both in-person appointments and those via telemedicine.

As part of the Vascular Health Program, Heart Function Clinic patients benefit from referrals to other services offered at PRH and in the community such as vascular health education classes for common risk factors for heart, stroke and diabetes, as well as common symptom control and self-management strategies.

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