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RVH meets diverse needs of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people on their cancer journey

To ensure the diverse and unique needs of First Nations patients are being met, the Simcoe Muskoka Regional Cancer Program at Royal Victoria Regional Health Centre (RVH) has added an Aboriginal patient navigator to the team.

This role, along with the already established role of regional Aboriginal cancer lead currently held by Connie Foster, supports RVH's commitment to providing the best patient experience possible by addressing the traditional culture and beliefs of First Nations people.

Now when a First Nations patient walks through the doors of RVH, they are greeted by Leah Bergstrom, the Aboriginal patient navigator, and walked through the system of care.

The position is just one element in Cancer Care Ontario's (CCO) Aboriginal Cancer Strategy which strives to improve health outcomes and the quality of life for Aboriginal people with cancer.

"The Aboriginal people have experienced 500 years of oppression which has created a culture of fear. To come to a government institution - like a hospital - is to face that fear which often prevents them from seeking the help they need," says Bergstrom, who is a member of the Métis nation.

Bergstrom provides and coordinates culturally and spiritually relevant support for Aboriginal patients and their families throughout their cancer journey.

"It's not just the process of navigating the cancer system that is important; it's doing so with respect for the original people of these lands and their worldview," says Lindsey Crawford, vice president, Patient Programs and regional vice president, Cancer Care Ontario (CCO). "Leah uses narrative medicine, including history and stories, to support patients in their healing process, as well as the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. Having her here is in keeping with our **MY CARE** philosophy which put our patients and their families first and promises to provide them with the most positive patient experience."

Bergstrom is the main contact for the people of Beausoleil First Nation on Christian Island; Moose Deer Point First Nation in MacTier; Wahta, Mohawks of Bala; Chippewas of Rama; as well as the urban Aboriginal population. She regularly visits these communities to build, or in some case re-build, relationships and trust in the healthcare system. She offers patients support to access healthcare services at home, coordinates traditional and non-traditional resources and healing, provides counseling before, during and after appointments, is an advocate for the patient, and is there to ensure patients' wishes are respected for end-of-life care.

But most importantly she is a friendly face when an Aboriginal person walks in the health centre.

"Just knowing there is someone here for them can reduce anxiety. I'm a friend who can take their hand and walk with them along their path," she says. "This is just part of the movement among Aboriginal people to reclaim their health and their access to healthcare. And RVH is there to help them along that journey."

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