

Alberta Doctors' Digest

How to support the caregivers who support your patients

Social prescribing is an intervention where physicians connect patients' caregivers with needed social and community care to help them deal with the crisis in caregiver mental health. This intervention provides caregivers with access to support groups, which can decrease social isolation and alleviate some of the pressures on the health care system. Services can include connecting caregivers to community resources or caregiver coaches working remotely throughout Alberta.

According to the Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing and the Alliance for Healthier Communities, social prescribing can significantly support the health care system by bringing an average drop of 28% in demand for primary care services and an average reduction of 24% in accident and emergency admissions.

In what specific ways do caregivers support the health care system? Caregivers do everything from bathing, feeding, cleaning, yard work, making appointments, tracking medical test results, bringing the patient to appointments, and so much more.

"Caregivers do all of the things in the background at home to keep that patient going and to keep that patient's health outcomes solid," says Liv Mendelsohn, Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence.

Mendelsohn also says there's a shortage of care workers, so the role of friends and family is crucial. "Not every family can find a personal support worker or other home health aides who can help ease the load, so it's really critical to find large-scale solutions that can reduce caregiver stress and increase their efficacy and capacity to continue support and care."

So what can be done to improve the situation?

"With our partners at the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, we have a new position dedicated to social prescribing," says Darrel Gregory, Executive Director, Caregivers Alberta. "We're looking at how we can connect with health care professionals to provide better support for the health and well-being of unpaid family caregivers."

Gregory understands that physicians are busy and have a limited amount of time when they see their patients, so it's important to have a level of awareness of the caregivers who may be present during those visits. "We encourage doctors to be aware of the stress that the caregiver may be under and that they are an important member of the health care team."

“What we’re seeking to do is intervene upstream,” Mendelsohn says. “Recognize that caregivers need support and provide a mechanism for physicians to prescribe that support with the help of Darrel’s team.”

The process is simple, Gregory explains, “We want doctors to be aware of Caregivers Alberta, so they can easily, simply make a referral of caregivers to us, so we can connect that caregiver to our programs and services.”

In summary, Gregory says the Caregivers Alberta organization is here to look after the health and wellbeing of the caregiver. “Yes, we know that will lead to better health outcomes for the care recipient, but we are here to support primarily the caregiver because we know that they are stressed and overwhelmed – financially, physically and emotionally. We encourage physicians to simply ask the caregivers how they are doing. There is a support here, and all we need is a hand off.”

How can doctors make this happen? Physicians can refer caregivers to the [Caregivers Alberta website](#).

Banner image: Darrel Gregory, Caregivers Alberta (Photo credit: Marvin Polis)