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Pain clinic easing what ails the north

By: **Jonathon Naylor**Posted: **09/12/2013 1:00 AM** | Comments: **0g**

FLIN FLON -- Rick Morris has a new lease on life.

A firefighter-paramedic in Thompson, Morris suffered a severe neck injury during a 2004 blaze when both his partner and a section of building fell on his head.

"For eight years I basically suffered every day," says Morris, 44.

Then one day last fall, Morris visited the Northern Health Region Pain Clinic, based in the Thompson General Hospital.

After a single medial branch block procedure (needles, no scalpels), Morris reported at least a 60 per cent improvement to his chronic pain.

Not only has he maintained this new level of functioning, his doctor is confident that in time the pain will further diminish.

"My outlook on life now is a lot different from what it was a year ago," says Morris, now deputy chief of the Thompson Fire and Emergency Services Department.

Morris is just one of many success stories from the NHR Pain Clinic, which quietly opened in September of 2012 with a \$350,000 capital investment from the NHR and the provincial government.

The NHR Pain Clinic is Manitoba's first and only pain clinic outside of Winnipeg. And it's on par with what is offered in the provincial capital, for only in the rarest of circumstances are patients sent south for more elaborate care.

Despite that, the clinic remains something of a well-kept secret, though that is bound to change.

In its first year, the clinic has had more than 760 visits from northern patients from as far away as Lac Brochet and Tadoule Lake.

They predominantly suffer from back pain or headaches that have not responded to conventional treatment. Others have pain stemming from cancer or complex regional pain syndrome.

Even the smallest of pain reductions can be life-changing, bringing immense satisfaction to Drs. Howard Intrater and Chandran Baker, the respected Winnipeg pain specialists who are at the clinic four days a month.

"Practising within the field of chronic pain management is both a challenging and interesting area for an anesthesiologist," says Dr. Baker. "When I see first-hand the profound impact it has on the personal, professional and family lives of patients, it's hard not to be humbled."

Helga Bryant, CEO of the NHR, hopes the clinic is an arrow through the heart of the long-held notion that northerners must venture to Winnipeg for the so-called best care.

"If we are to truly realize our vision of healthy people in a healthy north, then we need to always strive to provide the right care, at the right time, in the right place," Bryant says.

"Our goal will always be to provide care close to home to better meet the needs of our patients and their families' needs. That only makes sense."

Indeed, the pain clinic will eventually be a part of Thompson's expanded Northern Consultation Clinic, meaning even more specialized medical services for northerners.

"We continually are in conversation with additional specialists to expand the services we are providing," says Dr. Hussam Azzam, chief medical officer for the NHR, who first envisioned a northern pain clinic.

"That said, we are very tight for space and need to expand the Northern Consultation Clinic to make room for more specialists to practise. That's why we are excited at the prospects of expanding the clinic and welcome the government's ongoing commitment to that goal."

But why a pain clinic when surely many other health-care specialities would benefit a segment of the northern populace? Bryant says the facility results from "a combination of need and opportunity."

"The incidence of chronic pain is high, given our population base," she says. "When you couple that fact with the inherent problems of travel that is more difficult and painful for chronic pain sufferers, an in-region solution became preferable."

And few are as grateful for that decision as Rick Morris.

"It's needed up here for sure," he says.

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