

About the PATH Clinic

The PATH clinic is a health care service for older people with serious health conditions. People with chronic illnesses, their families, friends and health care providers, may face daunting challenges as they plan for the road ahead. They may have questions about how to get the most out of life, how to make health care decisions that reflect individual values, how to manage symptoms, and what lies ahead.

As people develop more health problems, they become frail. People who are frail may not be able to tolerate or benefit from complex medical and surgical treatments that tend to benefit healthier people. When existing health problems get worse, or new ones come along, frail people and their families must decide whether or not to go ahead with treatments that doctors or surgeons may offer. To make decisions that are right for them, they need to understand the health status of the person who needs care, the risks and possible benefits of each treatment, and how well they are likely to respond to treatment.

The doctors, nurses and other health professionals at the PATH clinic have specialized training and many years of experience working with frail, older adults and their families. They are here to help guide patients and families through the process of making health care decisions that will protect the patient's best interests and quality of life.

Palliative and Therapeutic Harmonization (PATH)

Therapeutic care aims to solve a person's health problem. Palliative care, on the other hand, seeks to reduce a person's suffering by controlling symptoms like pain or nausea. It does not try to solve the underlying problem.

There are times when it is appropriate to take all possible therapeutic measures to cure or delay the progress of an illness. There are other times, however, when this approach causes more harm than good. When a person is in the final stage of his or her life, palliative care is often the most compassionate course of action. The goal of the PATH clinic is to help patients and families choose a blend of therapeutic and palliative measures that will best preserve the individual's quality of life in their remaining time.

What to expect on the PATH

At the PATH clinic, you can expect a thorough evaluation of your current health status and an honest discussion about how your health is likely to change in the future. You can expect to receive all the information you need about your illnesses, how they will progress, and the potential risks and benefits of treatments. You can expect the staff at the PATH clinic to listen to you, answer your questions and support you in making health care decisions that reflect your values and what you most want for yourself and your family in the days ahead.

The PATH process

If you choose to embark on the PATH, you and your caregiver will make three separate visits to the clinic. Between each visit, you will have time to reflect on what you've learned and clarify your own thoughts and feelings. At the first visit, we will assess all aspects of your physical, cognitive (memory and thinking) and social wellbeing. At the second visit, we will let you know what we've learned and talk openly with you and your caregiver. Our goal for this second visit is to make sure we understand everything about your situation and what to expect as time goes on.

On the third visit, we will help you and your caregiver prepare for making future health care decisions. You may fill out a decision form that outlines your wishes as to what treatments you would or would not like to consider. We will inform your family physician and other relevant health professionals of your decisions, so that everyone understands your wishes. We will also provide you with a wallet card outlining key questions you or your caregiver should ask the health care team if you ever find yourself in an emergency situation. This will help you make on-the-spot decisions and avoid interventions that could make you suffer without improving your health.

Principles we follow on the PATH

We have four key principles that guide us in our work with patients and families at the PATH clinic:

1) Knowledge is power

People want and deserve complete and accurate information about their health status and how their health conditions will affect them in the future. We believe that when people truly understand their overall health picture, they will make the best decisions for themselves.

2) Focus on the big picture

Doctors must look at what's best for the overall health of patients with multiple health problems rather than trying to treat each separate illness. Frail older people with many serious chronic illnesses are less likely to respond to treatments. In addition, the treatment for one illness could make another illness worse and cause more overall harm. We believe that doctors must consider how all of a patient's illnesses and potential treatments interact, so they recommend only those steps that will help to improve or maintain overall health.

3) Carefully explore risks and benefits

The best health care decisions are made after full consideration of the long term risks and benefits. Patients and families can only make health care decisions that are right for them if they grasp the true nature of how a situation will unfold. While bad news is hard for doctors to give, and many do not want to take away hope, they must provide honest and timely information about what the future holds. We believe that patients and families can only plan appropriately if they know how severe an illness is, how it will progress, and how it may shorten life.

4) It all comes down to asking the right questions

We believe that by taking an organized approach to decision making, we can help patients and their families learn how to make more carefully considered decisions about what treatments they may or may not want to accept. We will provide you with questions to ask that will allow you to weigh the risks and benefits of potential treatments. Although we cannot predict every future decision that you may face, if you choose to join us on the PATH, we will walk you through a process that will give you the skills you need to make decisions for yourself now and in the future.

Getting on the PATH

People can be referred to the PATH clinic by their family physicians or specialists. The clinic is located in the Veterans' Memorial Building at the QEII Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. To learn more about the PATH Clinic, call (902-473-8603) or email us at:

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