

**BRIGHT LIGHTS AWARD**

  
2012

**Meeting Needs of Special Populations  
Award Winner - Guelph Family Health Team**

**Aging at home — primary care for housebound seniors**



They're a group too easy to overlook — the elderly who are so frail that looking after themselves or getting to their doctors' offices may be just too difficult to manage. Without attention, their chronic conditions can go unmonitored; their physical state may decline faster than the supports available can keep up with.

The Guelph Family Health Team wanted to reach out to this vulnerable group of patients, and established its In-Home Primary Care program for

seniors in 2008. Its goal is to support early identification and management of frailty, in order to prevent complications and risks.

The program staff are a team of primary care physicians and registered nurses with experience in geriatric care. They visit seniors — often as a result of urgent referral by primary provider after a missed office visit, or because of a call from a caregiver or friendly neighbour. The Aging at Home registered nurses are linked by secure wireless access to each patient's electronic health records, which allows them to communicate with the primary physician or others for support.

The program is particularly beneficial for frail seniors who depend on informal supports and are starting to have trouble managing their health through visits to their physicians' offices. It helps their caregivers (often elderly themselves). And it's also helpful for primary care physicians; it can lighten their work load, while letting them keep track of patients whose health is declining.

Surveys on the program to date show that 25 per cent of its target population needed chronic disease management. Another 50 per cent required comprehensive in-home assessments to identify potential risks related to their medication, safety around the home, memory and cognition, psychosocial status, caregiver burden, recent falls and the difficulties of the transition from hospital to home. All these issues have been shown to put frail seniors at greater risk of an emergency department visit or hospitalization.

In a survey of physicians, patients and families in July 2011, 32 per cent of physicians said using the in-home registered nurses reduced emergency department visits and 26 per cent said they deferred hospital admissions. Physicians and patients agreed in-home visits improved their engagement and involvement in planning health care needs, making it easier to achieve better quality of life and wellbeing for frail seniors.