

Six years after opening the Edmonton Zone's first unit for people with an aquired brain injury, CapitalCare Norwood has transformed the once stark and sometimes off-putting unit into a home-like and welcoming environment for those who live and work there everyday.

Photo: Darlene with health care aide Grecia Navarro



Acquired Brain Injury Unit

Darlene arrived on North Horizons in March of 2012 restrained in a wheelchair by a lap and chest belt. During the year she'd been in hospital before coming to the unit, Darlene's hands were also restrained and she was fed through a tube.

Care manager Cher Gauthier-Fownes says people with an acquired brain injury have unpredictable and sometimes aggressive behaviours, so physical restraints may be required in certain situations. "But it's no way to live your life, every day, for the rest of your life," adds Gauthier-Fownes, a registered nurse who started managing the unit two years ago.

Today, Darlene wears a cheerful purple sweater and a smile to match as she joins fellow residents in the sunlit dining room for the highlight of the week: Tuesday Lunch Club.

Lunch Club is a program developed by speech-language pathologists to increase independence in activities of daily living and to improve social communication in people with neurological disorders. This method of group communication is used in some

CapitalCare centres to help people with Alzheimer's disease maintain or regain routine motor memory.

Lunch Club is just one of the new therapies North Horizons has introduced to make residents' days more meaningful and life on the unit a more positive experience for everyone.

"When I started, the unit was safe and secure, but not very home-like," recalls Gauthier-Fownes. "Residents didn't have a lot of family - some had none - they weren't allowed to leave the unit, and not a lot of people came onto the unit, so they didn't have much in the

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The purpose of opening the unit in 2006 was to give people with an acquired brain injury a safe, secure environment where they can either 'age in place' or return to the community if possible. The goal was to provide as much freedom as possible by giving physical, emotional, mental and spiritual care as well as comfort and compassion to the patient, family and friends.

But balancing freedom with safety for people with severe and unpredictable behaviours proved to be a challenge that took many years of trial and error to achieve.

Previous to residents moving in, the unit had been renovated so that each of the 12 residents had a private room with an ensuite bathroom. Furnishings were purposely sparse because of some residents' tendencies to destroy objects like TVs, pictures and knick-knacks that otherwise would be considered home-like.

All the walls were painted a neutral beige - far cry from the hospital green they'd been before, but still not very

warm or personal. Despite a common room, secure outdoor garden and patio access to the outdoors by secure elevator, residents rarely socialized.

Today, the unit seems almost unrecognizable from its early days. Accent walls in the common room are painted purple and new chairs brighten up the space making it feel more like home. Resident rooms are being painted in distinctive colours and some have been retrofitted with indestructible furniture and wall mounted TVs, minimizing damage and making watching TV possible and enjoyable.

The bigger rooms contributed to Darlene's rehabilitation. "We put mats on the floor and let her roll around," says Gauthier Fownes. "With the freedom to move in a safe environment, she regained strength and is now walking again. As she regained her strength, we worked on improving her swallowing until she could eat more solid food. The next step is to get her accustomed to using dentures so she can eat some of her favourite foods again."

Lunch Club would not have been possible without a dedicated rehabilitation attendant for the unit. Amal Abdi had experience working with the young adult population and transferred to the unit about a year ago. "She's amazing," says Gauthier-Fownes.

"Their goal had been to go out for lunch, but they had to learn to work together and communicate as a group first," says Gauthier-Fownes. Last Christmas, the group went to Tony Roma's for Lunch Club.

"It's been a tremendous success, and one we never thought possible given the probability for unpredictable behaviours," says administrator Penny Reynolds.

Cher Gauthier-Fownes credits the staff - many of whom have worked on the unit since it opened - and management within CapitalCare and Alberta Health Services for the unit's success.

Health care aide Grecia Navarro has worked on the unit since day one.

"I came to work here because I wanted a challenge and something different," says Navarro, who has worked on every unit at Norwood including Safe Haven, a unit formerly dedicated to geriatric alcoholics. "I love working here, I love the residents, I love coming to work."

Gauthier-Fownes says the boundaries between staff and residents have shifted over the years. Residents and staff will often have coffee or eat a meal together.

Even the security guard joins in on the fun.

"The smiles on every one's faces make it all worthwhile."

For more information about the Brain Injury Unit (North Horizons), call the Nursing Unit at 780.496.3227.



Photo above: Staff tour a resident room in 2006.

Photo below: This resident's room is personalized and the furniture is specifically designed and built to withstand bouts of aggression.



Photo above: Chalk boards give Nick an outlet instead of writing on the walls.



Photo right: Peggy gets dolled up for lunch club