

Getting a Grip on Arthritis

In the winter of 2003, The Arthritis Society (TAS) and two arthritis researchers sat in a room and wrote a proposal. They had a plan to improve arthritis care across the country—they just needed funding to do it. Their plan was to implement a multidisciplinary approach to arthritis care in primary healthcare facilities across Canada. The plan was based on a pilot project—*Getting a Grip on Arthritis*—that had just wrapped up in Ontario in June 2003.

In November 2003, Dr. Mary Bell, a rheumatologist at Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre, and Sydney Lineker, a TAS researcher, received notice that TAS had been awarded the funding needed for *Getting a Grip on Arthritis*.

Getting a Grip on Arthritis is now rolling out across the country. It is a national program with the goal to improve the ability of primary healthcare providers and people with arthritis to manage the disease. The program is funded through Health Canada's Primary Health Care Transition Fund.

The program will target healthcare providers at primary healthcare organizations across Canada, including Community Health Centres, Family Health Networks (in Ontario) and *Centres Locaux de Services Communautaires* (in Quebec). Primary healthcare providers include doctors, nurses, occupational therapists (OTs), physiotherapists (PTs) and other healthcare professionals who treat people with arthritis. The program emphasizes arthritis prevention, early detection, comprehensive care, self-management, and timely referral to specialized care when needed.

Getting a Grip on Arthritis will involve 30 regionalized MAINPRO-C accredited workshops on arthritis best practices. The program will focus primarily on osteoarthritis (OA), as it is the most common type of arthritis, and rheumatoid arthritis (RA), as it is the most common of the inflammatory forms of the disease. The program will help healthcare providers distinguish between OA and RA and recognize RA as a medical emergency requiring early referral to rheumatology. The program will also give primary healthcare providers the skills to manage OA so inappropriate referrals do not end

up at rheumatologists' offices. As well, the program will encourage providers and patients to take advantage of TAS's services and other resources in their own communities, such as exercise programs.

Getting a Grip on Arthritis is unique from other interventions because it is not just a workshop for physicians. This program involves the whole healthcare team. And beyond the MAINPRO-C accredited workshop, the program includes a six-month follow-up, reinforcement activities to emphasize the skills learned at the workshop and support to help healthcare providers implement arthritis-care programs in their areas.

Rheumatologists and other arthritis specialists from the community (e.g., orthopedic surgeons, PTs and OTs with advanced rheumatology training) will be invited guests at the workshop when it presents in their region. "This is an opportunity for us to start building the relationships between primary healthcare providers and the arthritis specialists locally," says Dr. Bell, scientific advisor of the project. "Building community relationships will help to facilitate appropriate referrals."

Dr. Bell will be connecting with the rheumatology community in each province before the program rolls out in its region. Rheumatologists will be invited to attend stakeholder meetings in their province, to have the opportunity to participate in the planning process.

Getting a Grip on Arthritis is funded until March 31, 2006. The program is a joint initiative involving TAS and the following partners: Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre; Canadian Nurses Association (CNA); Arthritis Health Professions Association (AHPA); Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA); Patient Partners in Arthritis; Arthritis Community Research and Evaluation Unit (ACREU); Canadian Alliance of Community Health Centre Associations (CACHCA); and the Ontario Family Health Networks. "It has been a collaborative effort right from the beginning," says Ms. Lineker, director of *Getting a Grip on Arthritis*. The program is supported by staff at TAS's national office and by regional coordinators and administrative staff in five cities across Canada.

The *Getting a Grip on Arthritis* team was invited to submit a poster to the CRA's annual conference. "It was

an excellent opportunity to let people in the arthritis community know about the project," says Jennifer Boyle, clinical research manager at ACREU. ACREU is providing the evaluation expertise for the project. Dr. Bell presented the project to the executive of the CRA. "The CRA is very much on board and excited about the project," says Dr. Bell. Dr. Dianne Mosher, who sits on the Advisory Committee for *Getting a Grip on Arthritis*, also made a presentation about the project to the CRA membership at its annual general meeting. As well, Ms. Lineker presented the project to the AHPA membership who attended the conference.

Dr. Bell speaks about the project with enthusiasm: "This project will affect national healthcare policy. A

national, integrated, client-centred approach to the management of arthritis will help pave the way to lower healthcare costs and improved client outcomes."

To learn more about *Getting a Grip on Arthritis*, please call toll free 1-800-321-1433.



ExpertMD®: A Rheumatology Program Serving Patients in Canada

It is not groundbreaking news to state that manpower in rheumatology is in high demand and that patient access to expert advice is too often delayed for unnecessarily extended periods of time. We could, consequently, be under the impression that primary-care physicians can easily compensate for this shortage. Unfortunately, this is not the case either. In fact, the training that primary-care physicians receive in diseases of the musculoskeletal system adds up to a few weeks—at the very most. It is definitely illusory to think that such training is sufficient to adequately manage the diagnosis and treatment of these diseases.

Based on these premises, a group of Canadian rheumatologists, with the financial and logistic support of Merck Frosst Canada Inc.'s department of on-line Continuing Medical Education, have developed a new rheumatology program known as ExpertMD®. Approximately 250 primary-care physicians, with a particular interest in diseases of the musculoskeletal system, were recruited and have been following intensive training on the multiple aspects of these diseases for the last 12 months. In the first phase, a module on the general approach to arthritis, followed by two other modules on arthrosis and rheumatoid arthritis, respectively, have been developed and given to these physicians. The second phase, consisting of three modules, is in the process of being completed. This phase covers the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs/coxibs, depending on the scientific evidence available, followed by a module on soft-tissue diseases, with emphasis on infiltration indi-

cations and techniques. A module on lower back pain will be implemented in the fall of 2004.

Various adult-training strategies are used in all the courses, including formal educational meetings, tutorials and on-line clinical cases from the ExpertMD® internet site.

The modules can be transmitted in synchronous mode or asynchronously. All modules are preceded by a needs assessment, as well as an assessment of competence levels. The purpose of this learning mode variation is to allow better retention and better application of the knowledge acquired. The quality of the program is well proven by the fact that it has been granted 25 level C credits by the College of Family Physicians of Canada. This is the highest level of accreditation ever issued to an ongoing training program in Canada.

To date, comments have been very positive and very constructive; the assessments have also been very positive. The retention rate of physicians in the program exceeds 75%.

The ExpertMD® program is a very tangible example of a constructive partnership between a group of rheumatologists concerned about the progress of rheumatology in Canada, a pharmaceutical company, family physicians and two collaborating universities: the universities of Alberta and Laval.

— Denis Choquette, MD, FRCPC
National President,
ExpertMD® Rheumatology Program