

“Anybody who’s taking medication should have one of these cards.”

news

## New health card potential lifesaver

N.S. pharmacist finds way to keep meds in check

**Making a list, checking it twice. How many patients actually do that to chronicle and understand what medications they are taking?** Not enough, according to Karen Fraser, a hospital pharmacist in rural Nova Scotia. She said the inability of patients to accurately list their home medications is the number one problem in triage, and she set out to change that.

Fraser teamed up with a doctor and the local community health board to come up with a solution that is simple, easy to use and costs patients nothing: a credit card-sized medication identification card they keep up-to-date and with them at all times.

On the card, patients list the name, strength and dosing schedule of the drugs they take, and when they were issued. There is space for personal information like next of kin, family doctor and pharmacy phone numbers, and allergies or special medical conditions. Since the October launch, nurse practitioners, doctors and hospitals in the Cumberland health authority have distributed thousands of the cards. Their district encompasses the Cumberland Regional Health Centre in Upper Nappan, N.S., where Fraser works, as well as the Amherst and Springhill hospitals.

Fraser came up with the idea after taking part in a medication reconciliation project last November as part of the national Safer Healthcare Now! initiative sponsored by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. She worked on this project with Dr. Brian Ferguson, a local GP and emergency room physician at her hospital.

Fraser encouraged hospitals to begin urging patients to bring a list of their medications with them every time they came in, and was contacted by the community health board about developing a

template. After consulting Fraser regarding its design, the board came up with a folding wallet card they modeled after the immunization card. “It’s such a simple idea; it’s so low-tech and easy,” says Paul Hill, who chairs the community health board. He said the grassroots initiative is gaining acceptance, and he would be happy to see it expanded across Nova Scotia and Canada. “People are asking for them,” says Fraser. “I’m absolutely thrilled.”

Patients got the drug names wrong, were uncertain about what they were taking, or had lists of their old medica-

tions when they were being admitted to the ER, says Ferguson. “We want patients to take responsibility for their own health care,” he says. “You must know the medications, be familiar with their names and what they’re for. And when you are told to stop taking something, get rid of it.”

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Fraser believes the card is particularly beneficial to the elderly, but she also points out that even patients in their 40s and younger often don’t know exactly what they’re taking. “Anybody who’s taking medication should have one of these cards,” she says.

It’s also beneficial for patients who may arrive at the hospital unconscious or otherwise unable to communicate their health information. The card could help save the lives of diabetics, heart patients and people with severe allergies. Pharmacists wanting more information can contact the Cumberland Health Authority at (902) 661-1090.

—Alison Delory



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