



### **The Personal Health File – Don't Leave Home Without It!**

"A Portuguese woman came into Emergency, and she couldn't speak English," says Laurel deGoeij, an RN at Kitimat General Hospital. "The woman's daughter usually translated for her, but she wasn't there. And the attending physician wasn't her regular GP. So, the woman handed the doctor a small blue binder. He was relieved because now he had her Personal Health File (PHF). He could immediately see who her physician was, and what meds she was on, and her latest lab test results."

By anecdotal evidence like this, deGoeij is encouraged that the Personal Health File is being well received in her isolated northwest community. She remembers three years ago how the idea was initially met with disdain. A colleague had returned from a medical conference in Whatcom County, Wash., excited at having seen a demo of an electronic medical file. It's application was limited, however, by the need to sit around a computer to access the data. The project might have died but for one doctor at Kitimat's brand new hospital, who saw its potential – as a book.

"I was asked to take it on, to make a book version of the electronic patient file," says deGoeij, who is a Certified Diabetes Nurse Educator. "Anyone with a chronic disease was our target group to try it out."

"They were looking for someone who'd had a heart attack," says Dave Edwards, a retired Health and Safety Officer for Alcan. "They wanted me to join their CHF collaborative. I was supposed to share my experience of not just the heart attack, but of living with diabetes and congestive heart failure."

Until then, Dave had been controlling his diabetes by diet alone. Now, he was asked to experiment with the Personal Health File as a self-management tool, and to see if it suited him. "I can tell you right away it made me work harder at looking after myself," says Edwards. "I began checking my blood pressure and blood sugar every day. I was given targets – sugar counts, for example, of between 4-7."

The design of the ring-binder has made the PHF user-friendly. Credit goes to its graphic simplicity and clear organization with tabs for quick reference. From a short introduction, it proceeds to vital personal health information, to appointments, medications, health goals, and a log to record those blood sugar levels. Even a page to list health questions as they arise. And one blood-red tab for allergies and intolerances. It's entirely free of anything that might confuse the user.

"It's almost like a doctor's file, only not as thick," says Edwards.

"They're supposed to take the binder to every doctor's visit," says deGoeij, "and to the pharmacist each time a prescription is filled. Even to the massage therapist. The onus is on the patient to ask their doctor for copies of test results to install in the book." When that initiative is lacking, deGoeij reminds the patient that 'the idea is not to keep it hidden in a bag – you must gain the confidence to share it'. She encourages her colleagues to mention the PHF during patient sessions, otherwise there's a risk the book could be devalued in the patient's eyes. Some nurses have responded with a reminder tacked to the wall, while deGoeij herself keeps an actual binder visible on her desk.

“Physicians are the least likely to ask for it,” says deGoeij, “because they have their own charts. So it’s up to the patient, and that’s just another aspect of ‘self-managing your health’.”

Dave Edwards is a model of ‘self-management’. He’s more enthusiastic than most about keeping a finger on his pulse, and he knows it. It probably relates to a life-positive attitude that runs in his veins. “I don’t call my condition a ‘disease’,” he says. “Congestive heart *failure*, for instance, is not a good term because it frightens people. I think of myself having a heart ‘problem’, not a failure.”

Edwards isn’t lobbying to change medical terminology, because he realizes that doctors and nurses all speak that language. Furthermore, labels can’t dampen his satisfaction with the Personal Health File as a tool for managing his health. In fact, he credits it for raising his awareness of life in general. “Just yesterday,” Edwards says, “my blood sugar read 8.1. I said to myself, ‘What had I eaten?’ Or, was my system making too much sugar? My wife and I thought back and recalled drinking a cappuccino. So, it was a little ‘a-ha!’ It had sugar in it. I was relieved, because I knew.”

Patients who take the PHF seriously know where the binder is at all times. In case of a medical emergency at home, medics will find a fridge magnet with directions for locating the binder. Dave Edwards wouldn’t think of traveling without it, either. Twice this year he was in Europe. “If there had been an emergency, they could have checked the binder and seen what meds I was on,” he says.

It’s that kind of enthusiastic word-of-mouth that has helped the PHF take off. Last flu season, it was distributed to seniors getting their flu shot, and it has been growing ever since. Four hundred Kitimat patients now have that PHF fridge magnet prominently and proudly displayed.

And now it’s started to spread – to Terrace and Smithers and other communities, mainly within the NHA. Laurel deGoeij is delighted that the Personal Health File she developed is catching on and hopes it will become standardized around the province. In emergency situations, like that in which the fortunate Portuguese woman found herself, medics know immediately where and how to find life-saving information.