

April 29, 2004



calgary health region
communications



New ‘Ward of the 21st Century’ at Foothills Medical Centre Points the Way to the Future

The Calgary Health Region, in partnership with the University of Calgary, today opened a new \$5-million, 36-bed medical teaching unit at Foothills Medical Centre which sets a new benchmark for future inpatient medical wards across Canada.

Officials have dubbed Unit 36 “The Medical Ward of the 21st Century” because of its prototypical design and overarching mandate to pilot new approaches to health care delivery, research, education and technology.

“Unit 36 will allow us to provide excellence in patient care in a highly innovative and technologically sophisticated environment,” says Dr. John Conly, Professor and Head, Department of Medicine, Calgary Health Region and University of Calgary. “We anticipate that what we learn on this unit will be transferred to other medical inpatient units across the Calgary Health Region as well as across Canada.”

“No other health region in North America has tried this in as comprehensive a fashion,” adds Dr. Conly. “We are looking at every aspect of patient care – from physical design to the way medical residents are taught – to pilot approaches that will help us achieve our overall goal of creating a new model of ward care delivery for medical patients for the future.”

“It’s all about providing safe, efficient and effective care and an uncompromising commitment to excellence in care,” says Andrea Robertson, Director, Medical Inpatient Services, noting that patients on the unit have complex medical conditions and are the most acutely ill outside of those in the intensive care unit. “Ultimately, we hope it will result in people getting better, faster.”

Highlights of Unit 36 include:

- 28 private rooms with wheelchair-accessible private washrooms. Ten of these rooms have isolation capability with negative air pressure – ideal for managing an infectious disease outbreak like SARS, Avian Flu or other like illnesses.
- Enhancements for infection control including redundant handwashing stations.
- A 4-bed observation ward with bedside retractable toilets and dedicated support space to house the most acutely ill patients on the unit.
- Moveable walls that can be used to isolate patients depending upon medical need.

- Wiring throughout the unit that will allow for complete wireless access using personal computers or handheld devices for the benefit of caregivers, and patients and their families.
- Duplication of gases such as oxygen, air and suction at each bedside, providing the capability to add a second patient to every room in the event of a disaster.
- Dedicated education rooms to create an optimum environment for telehealth and teaching functions.
- Monitoring of a patient's vital signs using remote-sensing technology.

Robertson says technology plays a significant role on the unit. For example, medical and health care providers will have greater access to computers at the bedside and wireless handheld devices, which will simplify everyday practices like charting, and ordering medications. "Our vision is to link patients to their families and family physician whether that is in Calgary or Lethbridge, using information, telehealth and video technology."

"We are giving people the tools that will allow them to spend more time with the patients," explains Robertson, countering the notion that increased technology means less patient contact. "We don't want technology to get in the way of touch. It is our belief that technology in this environment will increase the amount of time with the patient."

Technology is also being used to enhance education and research – an important consideration since Unit 36 is partnered with the University of Calgary as a site to train medical residents, nurses, pharmacists and other allied health care professionals. In addition, a research collaboration between health care workers and members of the University of Calgary's Faculty of Engineering has led to the development of remote sensing capabilities for monitoring vital medical signs such as temperature, pulse rate and breathing.

"We want to create an ideal teaching environment," explains Dr. Conly. "We want to maximize the time staff and physicians spend with patients as well as teaching opportunities. That's why we are using new technologies like telehealth and the University of Calgary's Curriculum Information System."

Robertson says the creation of Unit 36 will provide long-term benefits to the Calgary Health Region and will undoubtedly help guide the development of future medical units as the city adds capacity to keep pace with rapid population growth.

"We are growing so rapidly, it is fundamental that we have an opportunity to try things here and know that they work before we commit to the same physical structure for the next 50 years. We need to know what we are building is flexible enough," says Robertson. "The whole design of this unit is to build and pilot new concepts. This unit is not done when it opens. When it opens, this is when we begin."

Capital funding for Unit 36 was provided by Alberta Infrastructure. Construction of the unit began in July 2003 and was completed in April 2004. The Calgary Health Region has 17 medical inpatient units at its three adult urban hospitals. Each of Calgary's three adult hospitals has a medical teaching unit.

***For more information:
Leif Sollid, Communications
944-4851***