

## PROJECT FACT SHEET

### Cancer Care for the Elderly

Investigators: Dr. Lorna Butler  
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Dalhousie University

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Assistant Professor, School of Nursing  
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Researchers from Dalhousie University partnered with representatives from QEII Health Sciences Centre, Capital District Health Authority, Shannex Corporation, Saint Vincent Guest Home and examined the status of cancer care for the elderly living in Long Term Care.

Cancer has been established to be a disease of the older population. However, little attention has been given to how prepared the healthcare system is to meet the changing demands of the elderly who require, long-term and follow-up care as a result of successful cancer treatments when living in long-term care facilities.

Dr. Lorna Butler Professor, and Dr. Marilyn Macdonald, Assistant Professor in the School of Nursing at Dalhousie University, received funding through the Foundation's Capacity Program and explored the linkages between long-term care facilities and the cancer care system.

"We were concerned the current health system is not prepared to care for these people (elderly)," explains Dr. Macdonald. "Our objectives for this project were to get some sense of the number of individuals living in nursing homes with cancer; what the existing cancer care guidelines are for the elderly and the current state of communication that exists between the cancer support system such as those provided by Cancer Care Nova Scotia and the nursing homes."

The team used Nova Scotia as a pilot province and conducted interviews in six nursing homes across Nova Scotia and used data from Cancer Care Nova Scotia. The researchers discovered that the actual number of adults living with cancer is unknown but based on the information collected the estimates are that five percent of adults living in long-term care have some form of cancer.

Dr. MacDonald's team discovered that there is no formal relationship between Cancer Care Nova Scotia and long-term care facilities and there is a lack of communication between the acute care sector, and long-term care. "Historically, living in a long-term care facility or nursing homes meant that you couldn't care for yourself either mentally or physically. You would be less likely to have received active or acute medical treatment," comments Dr. Macdonald. There is a pressing need to begin the full integration of the acute (active) treatment and continuing care services for individuals living with cancer.

However, the focus of health care in long-term care and nursing homes is slowly changing. As the baby boomers age and move into long term care facilities and nursing homes their perception of these places for living won't be the same as the previous generation.

Improved physical and mental health will mean the value of living to 80 is changing. “Without the support of the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation this project would not have been possible,” explains Dr. Macdonald. “With NSHRF’s support we were able to bring together the team and start our research on this important issue.”

Note: Dr. Butler was the original Principal Investigator on this project but moved to Saskatchewan where she is now Dean of Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Macdonald led the team for the remainder of the research project.

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