

# HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

The ambassador team's most important task is asking patients the one question that might make the most difference to their experience **By Jane Langille**

## ROSEMARY GRAY STAYS FOCUSED

on the little things so patients don't have to. She remembers helping a patient who had arrived at Sunnybrook through the emergency room. The patient was upset because nobody knew he had been taken to hospital and he couldn't remember his friends' phone numbers. Rosemary took the time to work through a phone book and helped him connect with his friends.

Whether patients arrive in an ambulance with just the clothes on their back or check in for a planned procedure, their first few days at a hospital can be challenging. Rosemary is one of seven ambassadors, a special team of volunteers set on helping Sunnybrook patients understand they have help beyond clinical care.

Ambassadors visit newly admitted patients to ask one simple question ("How can I help you while you're here?") and to share information about hospital services. "It seems pretty simple, but by opening up the conversation, we are helping people at a most difficult time," Rosemary says. "It can be overwhelming with lots of prodding and scheduling of tests. Patients can ask me those questions they don't want to bother the doctors or nurses with, but are still important."

Often patients or their families just need to know about parking or where to find an ATM. Ambassadors provide a reusable blue bag with a hospital directory of services and brochures about religious and spiritual care and how to thank someone on staff. Oncology patient Theresa Trabulsey was happy to find out about the on-site hair salon from ambassador Maritess Sahin. "Now that I know I can get a haircut here, I'm going to look into that. It would help me feel good after my surgery," said Theresa.

Selected from a pool of almost 1,000 volunteers at Sunnybrook, ambassadors provide outstanding service to patients and have received additional training about how to deal with sensitive situations such as grief, anger or even unexpected nudity. They arrange phones, TVs and access to Wi-Fi, provide parking information and suggest where to get coffee or a sandwich – the little things that improve a patient's stay.

"Many of our ambassadors have either been patients or had loved ones who were, so they immediately understand the value of having those simple things taken care



of from the outset," says Katherine Alexopoulos, director of Volunteer Resources.

The proactive, customer service approach of the ambassador program is also helping flag patient concerns early, so they can be solved while people are still in hospital. Ambassadors are not expected to resolve medical issues, but they ensure concerns are forwarded to the right people. Trish Lospinuso, patient care advisor with the Office of Patient Experience, follows up with ambassadors at the end of each shift. If there are complaints that need her involvement, she visits patients to hear their concerns and seeks a speedy resolution with medical staff. "We want patients to feel cared for and know that people will respond if things are not going well," she says. "We hope over time that we will put the complaint business out of business."

Ambassadors may visit up to 35 patients in a three-hour shift and each visit can take anywhere from two minutes to half an hour. The program was launched in

a pilot phase across four units and has expanded to cover about one-third of the hospital (including general medicine, dialysis, geriatric, general internal medicine, orthopedic and neurosurgical units, trauma and oncology, among others). Trish and Katherine are considering adding an evening shift and look forward to rolling out the program to more units.

Since the ambassador program began, patient satisfaction ratings have increased and complaints have decreased. Yuri Arutyunyan was visiting his mother the day after her liver resection surgery. He was thrilled with the outstanding care his mother received from the entire team at Sunnybrook, especially her surgeon. "I am very satisfied with my mother's care, but the fact that ambassador Maritess asked me about how things were going – well that's over the top," said Yuri.

"Our volunteers demonstrate the heart of the organization. It's the extra human touch that shows we really do care at Sunnybrook," says Katherine. ☑