

The Balfour Mount Palliative Care Unit is back home

The Balfour Mount Palliative Care Unit is finally finding its “new kind of normal,” after spending more than three years in a temporary location at the Glen site. The unit officially re-opened on D9 North, its home floor, yesterday. The long-awaited moment was met with joy and relief, and for many it is seen as a sign the pandemic really is over.

Working together during crisis

In April 2020, the world-renowned unit had to reorganize very quickly to make room for more beds for Internal Medicine as hospitals dealt with an influx of COVID-19 patients. The palliative care unit was left with six of its usual 12 beds and had to share space with a very different unit on D10: Medical Oncology.

“It was an exceptional time. We wanted to help the community, the hospital, our emergency department – everyone. We understood that we all had to roll up our sleeves,” says Dr. Stéfanie Gingras, medical director of the palliative care unit. “It was okay temporarily, but as the pandemic went on and we didn’t get to go back, it began to create distress.”

Relocation takes its toll

Pandemic-related restrictions meant that the unit lost many of the special services that set it apart. “We lost all our volunteers. Music therapy, massage and Reiki had to stop,” explains Dr. Gingras. “The atmosphere changed completely, too. Before we moved, we had a lot of beautiful paintings, a very nice family room with a piano, fridge, kitchenette and sofa. All of that was lost.”

“Being located on D10 with the oncology unit meant that we couldn’t do a lot of the usual things for patients who were admitted to our service, like a weekly afternoon tea,” says Dr. Justin Sanders, director of the MUHC’s Palliative Care Division. New patients had always been welcomed to the unit with a flower and card, but that had to stop because they were sharing space with immunocompromised patients. “All these things are very important and promote a kind of emotional healing, but they can only be done when we create a unique space for that purpose. Palliative care is not just about treating someone for pain with medication.”

The unit eventually lost specialized nurses, too. “The backgrounds of nurses who work in palliative care and those who work in acute oncology are not the same at all. Their approaches, interests, training and experience are very different,” explains Christine Bouchard, associate director of the Cancer Care Mission.

“Nurses who had been doing palliative care for years found themselves caring for a palliative patient in one bed, and then going to another bed and administering chemotherapy. They said: ‘This is not what I want to be doing’,” says Dr. Gingras. “It was very, very stressful for everyone.”

A bright future ahead

Leading up to the big day yesterday, a group from the unit met every week to plan the return to D9.



Left to right: Haiju Liu, Marie-Solange Bernatchez, Juliana Gyura, Dr. Julian Sanders, Tina Kusaian, Anna Burgos, Dr. Stéfanie Gingras, Deorani Seemungal, Virginia Lee **Front row (left to right):** Danielle Bouffard, Racha Hajjar

“Everyone wanted to do their part,” says Dr. Gingras. The massage and music therapists returned before the re-opening and the unit is looking forward to welcoming back volunteers from Cedars CanSupport. The multi-disciplinary team is thrilled to be back to 12 beds.

Christine says job postings for the unit will be very precise. “Nurses applying to these positions will be applying specifically to work in palliative care. We really want to recruit the right people for the unit: those who are drawn to this special kind of care, who want to accompany the patient and the families in the final stretch of life,” she says.

“To see it reopening is exciting,” adds Dr. Sanders. “The palliative care unit is a critical part of a hospital. It represents a new opportunity to transform the care of people with serious illness in the hospital.” The MUHC Foundation actively supports the unit through its fundraising.

During the height of the pandemic, a lot changed for the Balfour Mount Palliative Care Unit, but certain things didn't waver. “Our team remained tightly knit and, you know, when I was entering a patient's room, I was providing the same care as before,” explains Dr. Gingras, who adds with a big smile: “But the reopening is like a dream come true!”



