

## Groves Elder Life (GEL) Project: Virtual Family Visits for Elderly Patients

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### Short Communication

Geriatric patients admitted into hospital often have prolonged stays due to medical, surgical and social reasons. In addition, these patients can have elements of dementia, cognitive and mobility issues. They feel isolated and lonely in a different environment away from their loved ones. Although doctors, nurses and other professionals provide the best possible care, a family connection is a vital link in the wellbeing of patients. Several research articles indicate that regular contact with family and friends during hospital admission decreases feelings of loneliness and can aid in the recovery process. However, sometimes it is not possible for family members to visit and it is here that technology can help bridge the gap.

In December 2014, we at Groves Memorial Community Hospital in Fergus, Ontario launched the Groves elder life (GEL) project to virtually put patients in contact with family members. With the use of an iPad, patients' families can schedule calls using applications such as Skype and FaceTime. We started this project with the assistance of elder life specialists (ELS) from HELP (Hospital Elder Life Program) and their volunteers at our hospital. It received review from committees involved directly in patient care as well as staff managerial committees and hospital executives. All were greatly in favor of this project due to its potential to help patients and relatively simple operation—requiring only a tablet device and an already-existing Internet connection.

The program itself is run by our ELS, who coordinates a preferred timeslot between patients and families for their virtual visit. She and other volunteers also assist patients with using iPad. As part of our commitment to patient privacy and confidentiality, we also formulated a privacy policy and ethical guidelines, with final approval by the hospital's Medical Advisory Committee and Patient Care Managers. Among other considerations, these ensure that hospital staff shares no medical information during the visits and that no personal information is stored on the iPad.

Thus far, the feedback from patients, relatives and hospital staff has been very positive. All of the patients who have utilized virtual visits were very happy after being given an opportunity to connect with loved ones. We firmly believe that such virtual family visits can greatly improve patients' well-being and mood, helping decrease elements of depression and expediting recovery. Moving forward, we see the potential here for wider application of this service, perhaps into larger geriatric wards and residential homes or even our obstetrical wing to share the joy of a new birth. Furthermore, we also foresee the utilization of devices like iPad beyond communication tools, allowing patients to catch up on recent news or play cognitively stimulating games, thus providing them with a more profound social experience. Ultimately, we feel that initiatives such as this help bring the humanity back into medicine, bringing a marginalized patient group back into the fold and connecting them with their loved ones.