



### ***DIGMAS: Interactive Health Groups find the Fun in Health Care***

Imagine being a part of a medical drop-in group that meets on a monthly basis. The group is made up of people just like you with a variety of chronic conditions and health concerns. You and the members of the group are given your own medical chart at each session and you have time to openly discuss your health questions with your family physician, a nurse and other health care professionals. As an added bonus, your family physician takes time with you, individually, during each session, to address your current health status. This is a new and interactive way of receiving health care and assistance. It's called **DIGMAS**. That stands for ***Drop-in Group Medical Appointments***.

"Dr. Wray would see each one of us every session for about 5-10 minutes", says Celia Jellson, one of the *DIGMA* participants in a group run by Dr. George Wray and Anita Dotts, RN in Victoria. "I felt very comfortable having my own chart in my hands and having Dr. Wray chat with me while the group was discussing other things."

The *DIGMA* format empowers its members to ask '*real world*' questions. The 'icing on the cake' is that the topics that are discussed in each session are determined by the individuals involved. Participants share information on how to manage their health conditions by discussing their personal experiences in a relaxed informal group setting.

When Anita Dotts and Dr. George Wray recently coordinated a **DIGMA** for Dr. Wray's practice, they had the help of a Medical Office Assistant and other healthcare professionals, including a pharmacist and a nutritionist. They provided the opportunity for patients with chronic illnesses, ranging in age from 50-80 years, to attend and discuss their health concerns once a month for two hours.

Between 8 and 14 participants attended the group. People with multiple health conditions such as type-2 diabetes, arthritis, heart failure, high blood pressure and high cholesterol were invited to participate. Dr. Wray believes that this setting empowered individuals to ask questions and gain a better understanding of how to manage their chronic illness. Discussion occurred with the entire group at times, or between small groups of individuals with the assistance of a health care professional to answer specific questions. Celia Jellson felt that the group was a safe place to share her medical concerns. Occasionally, she felt that some of the group members would attempt to focus the discussion solely on themselves. "However", she explained, "Dr. Wray would always bring the group back on track".

Were the participants ever reluctant to share their personal health issues with a group or speak with the doctor while other patients were in the same room? The answer is a resounding "no". In fact, they actually enjoyed it. Participants realized that they were not alone in the health challenges they faced and that they could openly ask questions, feel the support of others and share their feelings. "I had a few questions about my diabetes, and found out that some of the other people in the group had the same questions that I did. That really surprised me!" says Joe Moran, another **DIGMA** participant.

The health care professionals involved were also surprised at how much they enjoyed it. "It gave us a chance to really get to know our patients in a more informal and relaxed way", says Anita Dotts, "and for me, it's put the fun back into health care". Dr. Wray, who was able to bill for

seeing his patients on a fee-for-service basis, agrees. He saw improvements in his practice by drawing on the skills of so many health providers.

**DIGMAS** can be held in private medical clinics, health units, church halls or wherever space is available that can accommodate a large number of people and is still within the neighbourhood and close to the physician's office. This allows the patients to identify with the physician's practice neighbourhood and the local community resources. One of the lessons learned from the DIGMA experience was the need to have enough space so that the participants could sit together, hear and understand what was being said. In the face of limited space, one creative idea that emerged was the "walk and talk". People could split into pairs or small groups and interact while strolling about. Groups can also choose to meet weekly or monthly based on their needs and the schedules of both participants and health care providers.

Drop-in Group Medical Appointments are still a new phenomenon in B.C. Issues such as finding and reserving space, coordinating the logistics of phoning the participants, setting up the room, planning a healthy snack all have to be coordinated. Generally it's the MOA or RN who is responsible. Yet, in spite of the logistical planning and the time it takes, the professionals who have experimented with **DIGMAS** love the fun and informality of the groups and see the improvement in their ability to deliver coordinated care. As for the patients, Victoria participants Celia Jellson and Joe Moran both openly admitted: "I would definitely do it again, it was excellent! I am just waiting to hear when the next one will start!"