



“SELF-HEALTH 101” UBC’s Student Health Service

“UBC does everything on the web, including teach courses,” says Dr. Patricia Mirwaldt, Director of Student Health Service, “so why not health services on-line too?”

The motivation for web-based services comes from a philosophy that sees informed, pro-active patients as partners in their own health care. Dr. Mirwaldt isn’t the author of the concept, but she’s gratified to be one of the agents promoting the responsible consumption of health care. It’s an idea that Dr. Mirwaldt would like to nourish into a full-blown culture among students at UBC.

“Many younger students are alone for the first time without their parents,” says Dr. Mirwaldt. “We want to show them how to self-manage their health care and how to become advocates of their own well-being.”

Self-management in health care is a goal consistent with UBC’s overall philosophy. University President, Martha Piper, wants to prepare students to become exceptional global citizens. It’s her vision to graduate men and women with strong analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. The VP of Students has built upon that with a directive called Student Development and Services, which aims to promote self management and global civilization by providing tools for success. That’s where the Student Health Service fits in.

The cornerstone of the program is a website offering students access to their own health files. Since March 2005, they’ve been able to log on and check the results of their lab tests, including X-rays. Traditionally, patients visit their doctor to get their lab results, but Mirwaldt’s attitude is, ‘It’s your hemoglobin, not mine.’ It’s also SHS policy to ensure doctors vet the test results before they wind up on the Internet just to ensure that if they are potentially upsetting to the student, then the doctor can personally deliver the results over the phone first.

Mirwaldt hopes that with proper use of the website, a student will learn when it’s appropriate to apply health care. In other words, when to call a doctor. To facilitate that decision, the home page of the SHS website offers a selection of Quick Links. There’s a Wellness Balance test, a What’s New? Department, a Workshops poster board, and a Wellness Q&A. Then there’s the link to make (or cancel) an appointment with one of the six family physicians on duty at SHS at any one time. Doctors leave a quarter of their appointments open for last-minute booking. Mirwaldt calls that ‘Open Access’. Walk-in patients can also take advantage of these time slots held in reserve. So far, only about 5% of SHS patients are utilizing the website, but promotional kiosks are coming in January 2006. Positioned in the clinic’s waiting room, they’ll raise students’ awareness of the health services offered on-line.

One advantage of logging on is to see what else is available. The Nursing Results Line for instance. This is a phone number dedicated to providing students with their latest lab test results. The on-duty nurse is available to interpret and discuss the numbers, dispense advice, and involve a doctor, if necessary. This service shouldn’t be confused with another SHS program – Nurses in Residence – which doesn’t depend on technology at all.

Now in its fourth year, students living on campus can come face-to-face with an RN without an appointment. In fact, without going anywhere. Debbie Aiken is one of two nurses who show up at two student residences, one evening a week. It’s hard to miss Nurse Debbie – or rather it’s hard to miss ‘The Nurse Is In’ sandwich board strategically positioned in the Commonsblock

where students mingle before and after dinner. She's available for 2 1/2 hours to discuss medical complaints and personal issues. Aiken describes it as 'walking them through the process of making health decisions.'

"I love it when she's here," says Julie Wilhelm, a third-year student who resides at Place Vanier. "Debbie is very friendly and knows what she's talking about." Wilhelm came to appreciate Nurse Debbie upon returning from Mexico with a gastrointestinal complaint. Debbie advised her to stick to fluids for a couple of days and see how she felt. Simple advice, but it meant she didn't waste time booking an unnecessary doctor's visit. "Knowing when you really ought to make a doctor's appointment is a big help for a busy student," says Wilhelm. "We let Debbie make that call."

Julie Wilhelm believes the success of the program is due in large part to familiarity. "Students know she's there. Week after week, she's there on Wednesday evenings. You anticipate her being there on Wednesday night, so, why wouldn't you chat with her if you had a problem? You know you're going to research your symptoms on-line anyway, so this is a lot better."

"Sometimes they approach me in pairs or groups," says Aiken, who is wearing jeans and a woolly blue roll-neck sweater. She's pleasantly surprised how candid some students are in front of their friends, discussing sexual problems, for instance. That might be because Nurse Debbie is so non-threatening. Or it could be because each week she sets up a display promoting healthy practices – about sexual relations, for instance, or the safe use of drugs and alcohol, or flu protection. 'Laughter Is the Best Medicine' draws a crowd, as does 'Stressfree Night 101'.

"The idea is to have fun and take away a message," says Aiken." The message she'd like them to leave with is: there is such a thing as Self-Care. Once students accept the idea, they're open to instruction in the proper use of the health care system.

"We want our students to feel confident knowing what good health care is," says Dr. Mirwaldt, "and then go out into the community as educated consumers."