

Warm fuzzies work wonders

Small miracles are popping up in health care facilities thanks to a fuzzy animal from down under.

by Erin Harde

Just over a year ago, the quality of life in a Battleford nursing home soared unexpectedly. Residents suffering from bed sores and pressure ulcers noticed the wounds clearing up. Some patients who were hesitant to walk began moving about with comfort. Others remained immobile because of their illness, but were no longer bothered by the painful sores. Similarly, two years ago in Regina, a stroke patient overcame the open wounds on his back. This is all a result of using sheepskin for wound care.

Australians have long known about the healing powers of sheepskin, but the product was just put in use in Canada in recent years. In Saskatchewan, use of sheepskin is slowly becoming more widespread. A genuine Australian sheepskin helps heal pressure ulcers quickly and improves the quality of life for people who have limited movement and are confined to a bed or wheelchair. In spring of 2004, a pilot project at the Battlefords District Care Centre in the Prairie North Health Region made believers of many health care personnel, who are in turn spreading the word.

Staff there were instructed to stop applying all types of dressings to six indi-

viduals with various stages of pressure ulcers, a sore caused by moisture and friction from being immobile. Over a two-month period, sheepskins were applied directly to the raw, open wounds. "It took a little convincing to switch from dressing to sheepskin and we were initially thinking it wouldn't work, but we were so surprised by the results," says Carol Dyck, facility manager.

Prior to the pilot, staff were treating one woman with an elbow ulcer that refused to heal. With sheepskin directly applied, the wound healed in two months. The leather backing works like a shammy, absorbing a large amount of moisture, while the wool's hollow fibres draw moisture and infection away from the wound and hold it in the leather. This improves circulation of blood around the area and maintains the body temperature at the sight. The body heals itself because all the things that are creating a problem are being drawn away from it. Staff were amazed to find that with many patients, the results were evident in two weeks. "The quality of life for residents has improved by the use of sheepskins. For ulcers to heal so quickly, it provides an enormous amount of comfort," says Dyck.

So much that one woman refused to give up her sheepskin for washing until she had another in her grasp. Another woman had a long-standing ulcer on her heel and was reluctant to walk. After wearing sheepskin booties for two weeks, the ulcer healed and she began walking again. Another resident who had sores on her hand was comforted by using the sheepskin palm protector.

At Wascana Rehabilitation Centre in Regina, 85-year-old Hank Klatt has also experienced the healing power of sheepskin. Five years ago, Klatt suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on one side. While nurses tried their best to rotate him so that his delicate skin wasn't susceptible to sores, he always managed to flip onto his back, an area that became vulnerable to pressure ulcers. Two years ago, Veteran Affairs Canada provided Klatt with sheepskins, which have made a huge difference. He hasn't had an open wound since he started using them. His wife Edie credits both the sheepskin and care from staff with the change in his condition. "I really appreciate the fact that he has the sheepskin," says Edie.

In order to be truly effective, the



Photo by: Kevin Dowler

sheepskin must not be synthetic, says Jim Watchman, general manager of North Sask Laundry which supplied the sheepskin for the pilot in Battleford. Prior to the trial, Watchman brought in eight different samples currently on the market, including polyester. "They couldn't handle the 160-180 C washing temperature required to sanitize them," he says. Nothing

came close to the authentic sheepskin.

Sheepskin's main drawback is the initial cost which is incurred by the patient's family. A 30" by 60" skin is \$500, but it saves money in the long run because the cost of dressing wounds and ulcers is expensive. The price to dress a small elbow ulcer over six months is \$28 per month, while using the sheepskin

While his sensitive skin easily bruises, Hank Klatt no longer suffers from open bed sores since he started using Australian sheepskin. The wool fibres, each individually held intact by the tanned skin of the sheep, contribute to the skin's value as a medical product. They reduce pressure, friction and moisture.

cost just \$6.50 per month. Following the pilot, staff members have encouraged families of patients to purchase sheepskins for their loved ones if possible.

Members of the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) can also purchase sheepskins at a reduced cost through SAHO's linen contracts, which has led to nearly all of the health regions buying at least a few sheepskins for patients. "SAHO certainly endorses sheepskin from a wound control perspective and endorses using the real thing over synthetic," says Clint Burlock, director of materials management and chair of the provincial skin and wound committee.

In his former work as a purchasing manager for the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region, Burlock witnessed how much patients love their sheepskins. "When the linen carts came in, sheepskins were the first items grabbed off the carts. It was like getting the good cookies off the bakery cart." **HM**

For more information about the pilot project in Battleford, visit www.northsasklaundry.com.