

BRIGHT LIGHTS AWARD


2013

**Improving Care for “the 5 per cent”
Award Winner - Sherbourne Health Centre Family Health Team**

Innovative cervical cancer screening for sex-trade workers



Sex-trade workers have a high risk of developing and dying from cervical cancer. Those who work on the streets, often struggling with factors such as poverty, homelessness, social exclusion and addiction, are unlikely to seek preventive healthcare. No surprise, then, that cervical cancer screening rates among street-based sex-trade workers in inner city Toronto may be as low as 39 per cent. The Sherbourne Health Centre tackled that problem by taking cervical cancer screening to them, using a mobile bus, unconventional hours and a peer leader to reach this marginalized and vulnerable group.

This innovative yet simple and relatively low-cost project began as a pilot in the summer of 2012. The Sherbourne Health Centre simply used a mobile health bus already deployed in the neighbourhood and sent it out at hours the women they wanted to reach would be available, from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. That brought an overwhelmingly positive response from the workers, who appreciated healthcare services being offered at times and places convenient for them. The project also used text messaging to do follow up. In phase two, scheduled from July to December of 2013, services were expanded to offer screening for sexually transmitted diseases. In the first 12-week phase of the pilot initiative, 294 women were seen. They were offered harm-reduction supplies and connected with the Sherbourne Health Centre clinic, housing, and social supports. To keep the project viable, more healthcare providers have been recruited to participate.

Other family health teams could use similar approaches — interdisciplinary teams, unorthodox hours and a mobile clinic — to reach out to vulnerable and marginalized populations. Dr. Ed Kucharski and Naomi Thulien, a primary health care nurse practitioner, did a presentation on the initiative at the international In Sickness and in Health conference in Montreal (July, 2013) and are scheduled to do another at the Family Medicine Forum in Vancouver in November. The initiative has been nominated for the Cancer Quality Council of Ontario Innovations Award.