

[The Spectator's view: Bright future for Hamilton health innovation](#)

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Hamiltonians can be justifiably proud that a health-care organization based in this city is doing leading edge work that could change the way health care is delivered across the province.

On the surface, bundling health-care services sounds deceptively simple. Instead of having patients bounced from one sort of a provider to another — family doctor, hospital, long-term care facility or community care provider, for example — patients are assigned a single case worker who would help them navigate the complexities of the system. **St. Joseph's Health Care** piloted the project back in March, 2012.

The results, so far, are positive, to say the least. On average, hospital stays for the cases covered by the pilot are down 24 per cent. And emergency room visits after initial discharge have decreased by 15 per cent. Overall hospital readmissions are half what they were before the pilot project was launched, focusing on lung cancer, joint replacement, chronic pulmonary obstructive disease and congestive heart failure patients.

As Health Minister Deb Matthews said announcing \$1.6 million in funding to expand the Comprehensive Care Project to **St. Joe's Kitchener site**: "St. Joe's is a real leader. They're pioneering this and by all accounts this is a great success."

It's not a surprise. Anyone who has had to navigate the health-care system on their own, or on behalf of a loved one or friend, knows how brutally complex and institutional it can seem. Factor in vulnerability due to illness or socioeconomic status, and you have recipe for ineffective outcomes. **St. Joe's CEO Kevin Smith** said when the project was launched: "We're always talking about where are patients most frustrated and it's almost always the points at which we hand them over between hospitals and family doctors and long-term care and home care."

Introducing a single point of contact, a case worker, who knows the system inside out as well as a contact available 24 hours a day, reduces stress on the patient and time wasted both by patients and people within the system. It's having an expert advocate who can calm nerves, give advice and get things done.

As Matthews noted, it's better care at lower cost. No wonder she is enthused about expanding the project, beyond **St. Joe's** and across the province.

One thing that's not clear yet is how the program will work when it has to bring together independent partners. St. Joe's has the distinct advantage of having

diverse forms of care under one health and corporate umbrella, while many health-care systems aren't bound as tightly.

Still, aside from that considerable challenge, there is reason to hope this innovative solution could make a real difference in the sustainability of health care. And it's made right here in Hamilton.

- Howard Elliott