

A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

Two Ontario nurses play a pivotal role on the eye care team that treats northern Ontario residents out of the back of a tractor trailer. BY KIMBERLEY KEARSEY



Alison Walker (left) and Darla Pfahler have acquired more than just new nursing skills as ophthalmic assistants on Ontario's only mobile eye care clinic.

RNs Alison Walker and Darla Pfahler never expected to know as much as they do about the engine components of a tractor trailer. In fact, it never occurred to either of these ophthalmic assistants that they would one day complete an intense four-week, one-on-one truck driver training course as part of their professional development in nursing. But such are the skills required of the RNs on Ontario's only mobile eye care clinic, a custom built big rig that travels more than 6,000 kilometres through Ontario's north between March and November each year.

"Every transport truck I saw on the highway... I was thinking 'oh my, I'm going to be driving one of those,'" Pfahler remembers thinking after she accepted the unique nursing role. "I was really nervous."

That was five years ago. Today, she and Walker are seasoned professionals when it comes to maneuvering the massive vehicle. And they're both just as comfortable inside the clinic as they are crawling under it every week or so to check the brakes, lights, and flatbed connection before each leg of their 30-community tour.

When they're not wearing their mechanic or truck-driver hats, Walker and Pfahler work with a team of 20 rotating ophthalmol-

ogists to care for up to 50 patients a day. Their work space is about the size of an average school classroom and holds 10 people at a time. There's a reception desk, a vision screening area, and an examination room. "It's more informal than a lot of clinics," Walker says, adding that many patients will sit in the waiting room with people they've known for years. "Sometimes... they see each other around the same time every year and gab," she says. "It's really nice."

CNIB has offered this essential eye care service to northern communities for 35 years. Over the past decade, more than \$450,000 in grants from the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund have paid for the equipment updates that are needed to provide care to the 5,000 patients it serves each year. And those patients come from all walks of life.

"If we're in a community for three weeks, we're not necessarily just providing service for that community," Pfahler says. "We're pulling from outlying areas as well."

Many of their patients, in fact, are from Aboriginal communities. These individuals often suffer from diabetes, which can cause bleeding from the back of the eye. Walker and Pfahler conduct routine screening, and

on many occasions have provided care that saves vision.

Last year, a woman who lived almost two hours outside of Kapuskasing rushed into the clinic when it was stationed there. She complained of sudden vision loss overnight. The team discovered she had an embolism at the back of her eye, which was blocking the blood supply. The ophthalmologist put a needle in her eye and drew the clot out of the way. "The doctor put the needle in and I pulled the plunger back," Walker explains. "It was really cool."

The woman was sent to hospital, but returned to the truck when it arrived in her home town of Hearst two weeks later. She had regained some of her vision. "If we hadn't been there, she would have had to go to Toronto or Ottawa, and by the time she (got) there, she probably wouldn't have any vision left in her eye at all," Walker says.

Pfahler has been on the truck longer than any other RN. She says her five years of service have made one thing crystal clear: the team protects more than just vision. They do a lot of screening of children and infants, and have learned to look for things like the red reflex, a response that turns eyes red in photos. If they don't see it, she explains, they know there's something wrong at the back of the eye. "We've seen a number of patients who have melanoma at the back of their eyes. By providing emergency referrals to have them surgically removed, we've saved their vision and we've saved their lives," she says.

Pfahler also recognizes she's a bit of an anomaly. Most RNs only commit to a few years with the clinic. That's because the schedule is grueling and the constant traveling is hard on those with a family. Walker will be on board for 2008 but she doesn't see herself continuing in 2009. Pfahler, on the other hand, is not ready to quit just yet. "I've gotten to know so many people and they're like an extended family on the road," she says. "At Easter, I invite myself over to this couple's place in Iroquois Falls." That's the same stop on the tour where she also sees a local woman known for her blueberry pies. "There's always someone very special who takes care of us while we're on the road."

That seems only fitting when you consider just how many people Walker and Pfahler have taken care of during their travels. **RN**

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