



Dr. Paul Van Zyl, Orthopedic Surgeon at UHNBC and NH PQI Alumni

Shoulder Care Clinic in Prince George cuts wait times by 80%

A Physician Quality Improvement (PQI) program Alum at the Northern Health (NH) Shoulder Care Clinic in Prince George teamed up with their local PQI program to reduce average clinic wait times for new patients from 300 days to 48 days in 10 months at UHNBC.

Why it matters

Non-traumatic shoulder injuries are common and most resolve with timely diagnosis and physical therapy. Delays in assessment often result in prolonged symptoms, severely reduced function and significant patient morbidity. The Prince George Shoulder Care Clinic had become a victim of own success with increasing referrals resulting in long waits for new patients. This negated the principles of early assessment and intervention on which the clinic was originally founded. Access to health services is a complex but perennial problem in BC. Quality Improvement (QI) science helps teams analyze complex clinical and operational problems and implement data-driven solutions successfully.

How they did it

The original concept of a one-stop shoulder care clinic was the concept of Prince George sports physician Dr. Janet Ames in 2017. With support from the NH PQI program, Dr. Ames developed the multidisciplinary clinic for patients with non-traumatic shoulder injuries to receive a clinical assessment from a sports physician, a therapeutic cortisone injection, see a physical therapist and an orthopedic surgeon if required, all on the same day. Since its implementation, the number of referrals to the clinic has risen year on year resulting in average wait times for new patients rising every year from 56 days in 2018 to 300 days in early 2024.

Dr. Paul Van Zyl, one of the original clinic team members and a newly minted PQI alum, joined clinic staff—including sports physician Dr. Rob Tower, physiotherapist Tyler Wood, manager Karina Hansen, and unit clerk Fran Carmichael—to revisit clinic operations using QI methodology. Their goal: to reduce wait times for new patients to 90 days within a year.

Change ideas implemented included: new and tighter referral guidelines to reduce inappropriate referrals, multi-operator criteria-based referral vetting, waiting list validation and a “physical therapy first” pathway. The clinic saw rapid results with new patient wait times falling from 300 days to 48 days within 10 months. A great result for the project team – well worth celebrating, and another win for QI science.