

# WALKING WITH PATIENTS

## DR. SUSAN ROHN'S MISSION TO TRANSFORM PALLIATIVE CARE IN THE KOOTENAYS



For local physician Dr. Susan Rohn, the call to medicine began more than four decades ago with an interest in sports medicine — but it was working as a care aide in a nursing home as a high school student that set her on a different path entirely. That early experience revealed something that would shape her life's work: the quiet, profound moments of care that happen when people are vulnerable, aging, or dying — and the unique role health-care professionals can play in helping them feel seen, heard, and supported.

Now serving as the new Regional Medical Director for Palliative Care and End-of-Life Services in Interior Health East, Dr. Rohn is bringing her deep compassion and big-picture thinking to the East and West Kootenays. Her aim? To strengthen palliative care services across the region, build community-based networks of support, and reimagine what it means to provide care at the most delicate stages of life.

"Palliative care has been misunderstood as only encompassing end of life care. It really is an approach to care for patients in their last one to two years of life. Palliative care refers to symptom burden assessment and management and does not exclude active care," says Dr. Rohn. "Ideally, it starts when a patient has a life limiting illness. It's about managing, improving quality of life, and making sure patients and families understand what's happening. It's about walking with people — patients and providers — through some of the hardest decisions they'll ever make."

Drawn to the snow and the ski hill, Dr. Rohn moved to Fernie in 1998. Her career journey spans rural family practice, hospitalist work, locuming, and leading community palliative rounds in the Elk Valley and surrounding areas. Through these weekly, multidisciplinary meetings, she's seen the value of collaborative, proactive approaches that centre around the patient experience. She's also seen the gaps — especially in rural communities — where patients are often treated by multiple specialists across long distances, with no one seeing the full picture.

"We have specialists in different places doing good work, but the patient can feel lost in it all. We need to shift toward an integrated, team-based model where everyone, from specialists to family doctors to nurses, takes a palliative approach when it's appropriate."

That approach, she emphasizes, doesn't mean "giving up." It means recognizing when a person is facing a life-limiting illness and supporting them with clear communication and information, symptom relief, and respect for their values. It means helping them stay in their communities, surrounded by loved ones, whenever possible.

Dr. Rohn knows the work is complex — and personal. She's seen firsthand how treatment decisions can impact not only lifespan but also quality of life, particularly when patients and families don't fully understand the implications of aggressive interventions.

"Patients deserve true informed consent. That means they need to understand their illness, their options, and what those choices mean for their day-to-day life. And they need support making those decisions when they're scared, overwhelmed, or sick."

As she steps into her new regional role, Dr. Rohn is connecting with health-care champions across the Kootenays to build a stronger rural palliative network. Her goal is to expand community palliative care rounds, enhance education through LEAP and Serious Illness Conversation Guide training, and elevate patient and family voices in shaping the future of care.

"I'm not here to reinvent the wheel," she says. "I want to learn what's working in each community and help share that knowledge region wide. I also want to hear from patients, families, and providers — because their stories and insights are what guide us forward."

Through it all, she remains grounded in her belief that good palliative care is about presence and partnership. "There's something profound about this work. In some ways, the end of life is like birth—it brings people together, strips life down to its essence. It's a privilege to be part of that."

As we recognize National Hospice Palliative Care Week, we also recognize the vision and heart Dr. Rohn brings to her new role—one grounded in rural realities, shaped by lived experience, and focused on making space for patients to be heard, comforted, and cared for with dignity.

*If you're a health-care provider in the East or West Kootenays with a passion for palliative care or an interest in building collaborative, community-based approaches to care, Dr. Rohn would love to hear from you. She is actively connecting with palliative care champions across the region and welcomes new voices, ideas, and experiences.*

*You can reach her by email at [susan.rohn@interiorhealth.ca](mailto:susan.rohn@interiorhealth.ca).*



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