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New clinic for transgender Albertans first of its kind in prairies, psychiatrist says

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[\[Video \(no direct link\)\]](#)

A novel program that plans to transform health care for transgender Albertans aims to reduce wait times and improve access to medical treatments.

“Persons who suffer from gender dysphoria while waiting and frustrated ... have really high rates of low mood, anxiety and even self-harm and suicide,” psychiatrist Dr. Michael Marshall said Tuesday.

Marshall is one of five psychiatrists qualified to diagnose gender dysphoria in the province, but it takes up to six months for patients with referrals to see him at his Red Deer clinic.

He’s moving to Edmonton in February to establish the Gender Health Program at the University of Alberta Hospital — the first of its kind in the prairie provinces, he said.

Many health-care providers feel they don’t have enough experience or knowledge to treat transgender people, which can lead to disappointment and isolation, said Marni Panas, AHS senior adviser on diversity and inclusion.

“We go somewhere else until there’s no place left to go,” she said.

Seeking treatment is a life-saving trip, she said.

“Every transgender person is different in their journey to achieve their true, authentic self,” said Panas, 47. “It took me 42 years to find the words, to find the courage to say, ‘I am transgender.’”

Her journey included more than a year of mental health support followed by a medical transition.

“It’s amazing how far you will go to receive treatment where you feel respected and valued,” she said.

The new program has a threefold mandate centred on training, research and medicine.

“Our aim is to have medical students rotate, have electives for psychiatrists and to have a fellowship,” Marshall said of the training component, adding there’s little education available

for Alberta doctors who have transgender patients.

He also hopes to establish a research chair position to study transgender health.

“That’s a long way away,” he said, noting the program is in its early stages.

His vision for the medical portion of the program is a one-stop-shop clinic, where transgender people can access services ranging from mental health supports to hormone replacement therapy.

“If we could, that would be ideal,” he said.

The clinic’s exact location, as well as program funding, are still under discussion, said Alberta Health Services (AHS) spokesman Kerry Williamson, noting it’s a joint project with the University of Alberta.

Marshall emphasized that every transgender person requires different services — “the process could be as simple as merely changing a driver’s licence to show who they are, to across the full spectrum ending in gender reassignment surgery.”

In 2016-17, AHS approved 38 applications for final-stage gender reassignment surgery, including phalloplasty and vaginoplasty. After receiving funding, patients go to Montreal for surgery, generally within the same fiscal year.

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