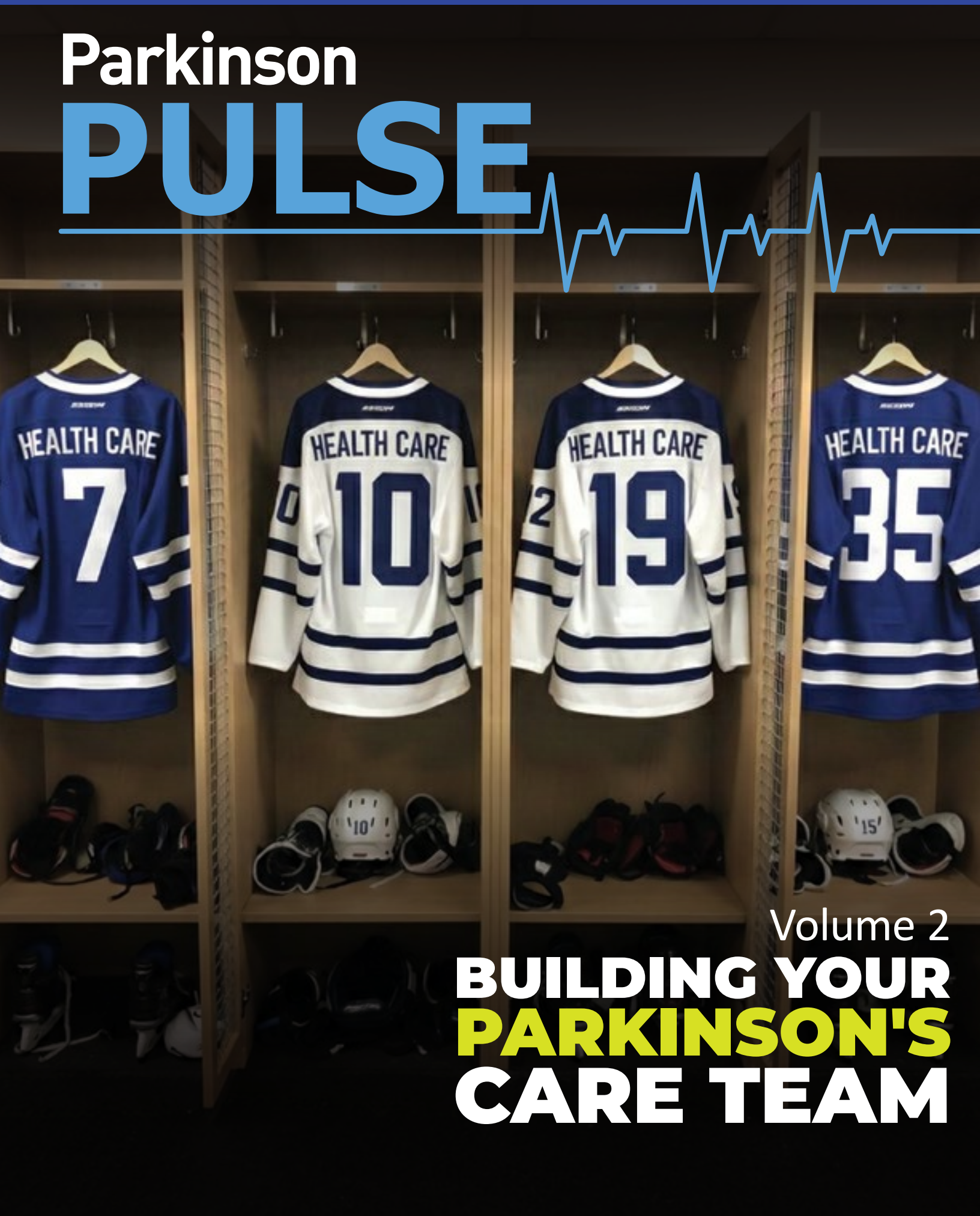
Parkinson Association of Alberta *Quarterly Magazine* Winter 2026

Parkinson PULSE



Volume 2

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Parkinson Association of Alberta

Articles and information contained in the Parkinson Pulse are provided solely for the reader's interest.

Articles do not necessarily reflect the views of Parkinson Association of Alberta and are NOT intended as medical advice. Please consult your doctor or neurologist in all matters relating to health concerns or medication.

Parkinson Association of Alberta empowers individuals and families throughout their Parkinson's journey, responding to each unique need with knowledgeable and compassionate support.

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Message from our Executive Director

Dear friends,

As we step into 2026, Parkinson Association of Alberta is energized by a renewed sense of possibility. Every new year brings its own momentum, but this one feels especially meaningful. Across Alberta, more people than ever are seeking support, connection, and practical tools to help them navigate life with Parkinson's—and we are preparing to meet that need with creativity, compassion, and a commitment to strengthening the circle of care around every individual and family we serve.

This year, we are expanding our focus on collaboration: between our staff and volunteers, between clients and their loved ones, and between the many healthcare professionals who play a vital role in ongoing wellbeing. That spirit of partnership is at the heart of this continuation of last fall's theme: Building Your Care Team. Whether you are newly diagnosed, many years into your journey, or caring for someone you love, having the right people beside you—professionals, peers, and personal supports—can make all the difference.

Inside these pages, you'll find stories, insights, and practical guidance to help you discover who belongs on your team and how each connection can empower you to live more fully. From physiotherapy and mental health supports to innovative exercise programs, digital tools, and community-based initiatives, 2026 will bring a range of new opportunities designed to help you stay active, informed, and supported in every dimension of your care.

As you read, we hope you feel encouraged by the possibilities ahead and inspired to continue building a care team that reflects your needs, honours your strengths, and supports your goals. Together, we can continue shaping a future where every person living with Parkinson's in Alberta and beyond has the tools, resources, and community they need to thrive.

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to send a heartfelt thank you to each individual and family who made the decision to invest in the future of support at Parkinson Association of Alberta. Whether designated to Alberta-based research or the day-to-day activities of our organization, every dollar makes a difference in the lives of those affected by Parkinson disease. We are grateful for your trust in us and are committed to learning and adapting to the changing needs of our community.

We wish you all the best for a hopeful year ahead!
Lana

BUILDING YOUR PARKINSON'S CARE TEAM

Written By: Brandi La Bonte

Over your Parkinson's journey AND aging in general, things will change. From how you move and what you do on a day-to-day basis, to maybe where you live or how you feel. When it comes to the health care aspect of your life, a variety of professionals with distinct kinds of training will be needed to serve those evolving needs.

"Why a variety of people," you might be thinking. Well, for starters, not every issue needs to be addressed by a family doctor; and in today's healthcare landscape you might not even have one. So, accessing other professionals (like the ones we have listed in this issue and in our Volume One issue). This could be a neurologist to treat Parkinson's, an ophthalmologist to deal with cataracts, or a PAA Client Services Coordinator to discuss Parkinson's topics, government resources, or mental/emotional health concerns. All these people work together to form your care team. These (and others) are highly skilled, dedicated professionals who work in a coordinated way to support and guide your healthcare needs. Through it all, your primary care physician is the first point of contact for your care. This issue offers a bit more information about care teams and how they work together to support your well-being.

What different health team "positions" have in common is that between them they will offer a broad range of supports and services, including in-person; telephone; virtual care and referrals. Your team might not be located under the same roof, but you will have access to providers with relevant skills who have the skills to keep you as healthy as possible. They can (depending on the professional) treat, assess, inform, discuss, and connect you to programs in your community — faster.

Beyond that, the makeup of a team depends on YOU and YOUR needs. Being able to customize your care team means you have team that can provide you with the right supports, at the right time, throughout your Parkinson's journey. ■

If you are not sure where to start or how to go about building your care team, please reach out to our Client Services Team at ***1-800-561-1911.***


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MOVING PART(NER)S

Physiotherapists

Written By: Michaela Lay

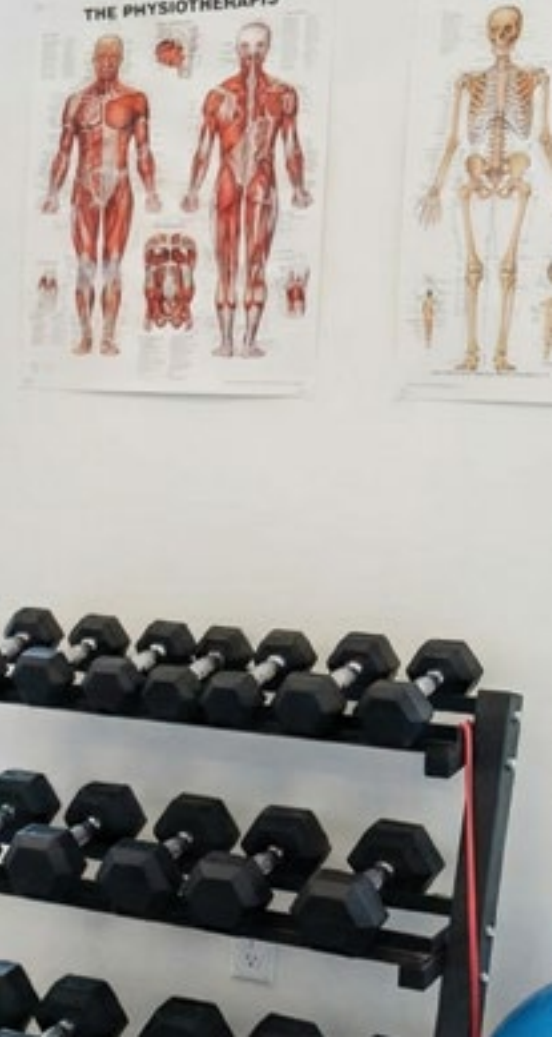
"A physiotherapist may design a personalized exercise program that matches an individual's stage of PD, mobility level, and goals."

Whether you're new to the world of Parkinson disease or you've been on this journey for a while, you've probably come to learn that there are a whole lot of people who can help. Among these, a physiotherapist is essential. You might be thinking, "But wait a minute, I haven't been injured, what is a physiotherapist going to do?" Great question! Read on my friend.

Physiotherapists are a regulated profession and must be registered with a provincial regulatory body. Most physiotherapists do not require a referral, though some public health providers and/or clinics may require it. A physiotherapist helps people with injuries, disabilities, and other concerns through exercise, manual therapy, and education. They support long-term function, safety, and quality of life in addition to assisting with improving or maintaining movement/mobility and strength.

Here's how a physiotherapist can make a meaningful difference for people with PD:

Pain is a popular topic when people seek out our support at Parkinson Association of Alberta. People may experience joint discomfort, muscle



tightness, or dystonia—a painful cramping or twisting of muscles, often in the feet, hands, or neck. Physiotherapists may address pain through targeted stretching, strengthening, manual therapy, and posture correction to reduce discomfort and support better body mechanics. By relieving these physical stressors, they help restore confidence in everyday movement.

Parkinson's can also impact breathing, as the muscles involved in breathing may weaken or become less coordinated as the disease progresses. Physiotherapists incorporate breathing exercises into treatment plans to improve breath control, stamina, and postural support—essential for both activity and speech. For example, training in diaphragmatic breathing (big belly breaths) and breath pacing can help reduce shortness of breath and fatigue during movement.

Most importantly, physiotherapists are experts in keeping people active and functional, allowing you to PUSH forward. Movement is medicine, use it or lose it, and motion is lotion are all common sayings in both Parkinson's AND aging in general. Regular physical activity helps slow motor decline, improve balance, and boost mood. A physiotherapist may design a personalized exercise program that matches an individual's stage of PD, mobility level, and goals. They can also assist with specific exercises to help keep you functional – things like improving range of motion to put on a jacket, bra, or shoes. Or increasing core strength to improve posture and decrease falls. Or lower body moves to help with walking or stairs.

Physiotherapists Support Care Partners Too

Physiotherapists also provide vital education and support for care partners, who are often navigating daily tasks and providing physical assistance to loved ones with little or no formal training. A physiotherapist can guide you as a care partner on how to safely assist, lift, or transfer your loved one, which is essential to prevent injuries for both of you. They also offer guidance on how to promote movement and independence while respecting safety limits, reducing the risk of falls or over-dependence.

Additionally, physiotherapists can help identify the right mobility aids (like walkers or transfer chairs) and train both the person with Parkinson's and their care partner on correct use. They may also suggest ways to build shared physical activity into the daily routine—so care partners and loved ones stay active together in a way that's safe, engaging, and sustainable.

Physiotherapists can be accessed through both public health and private business avenues. In the former, wait times may be longer, while the latter may be costly. Many private insurance plans offer some physiotherapy coverage.

Looking for a physiotherapist can be overwhelming with so many to choose from. In Alberta physiotherapists can have a specialty, but there isn't a formal, legislated designation system. Specialization is attained through additional training and demonstrated expertise in a particular area. It may be difficult to find a physiotherapist with significant Parkinson's knowledge; however, most physiotherapists will be able to support your regardless of specialisation. It's important to ask questions specific to your needs during your first assessment and it's okay to try a different practitioner if you don't "click" with the first one or if you don't feel your goals align.

Including a physiotherapist in your health care team can ensure that you get the help you need keep moving, keep connecting, and keep living well. ■

SMALL CHANGES, BIG DIFFERENCE

Occupational Therapy and Parkinson's

Written By: Candice Mandin

> Let's face it—Parkinson's disease doesn't exactly play fair. One day you're tying your shoes or sipping your coffee like usual, and the next, those same routines feel like climbing Everest in flip-flops. But did you know there's a health care professional who can help? An Occupational Therapist!

Occupational therapy, contrary to the confusing name, is not about finding a job. When people hear the word "occupational", they may think this is related to employment: what we do for work. Occupational therapy uses the word "occupational" because the core of the profession focuses on helping people participate in the everyday activities (or "occupations") that are important to them, promoting health and well-being through these activities. It's about helping you stay steady and self-sufficient in the things that matter most—whether that's cooking your famous chili, walking the dog, or simply getting dressed without a wrestling match with your sleeves. An Occupational therapist gives you practical tools, creative strategies, and experienced support to help you adapt and thrive, no matter where you are in your Parkinson's journey.

What can an OT help with?

Occupational therapists (OTs) start by getting to know you — what you're great at, where you might need a bit of support, and what goals matter most to you. From there, they work with you to create a personalized treatment plan that fits your needs and lifestyle.

Whether it's getting dressed in the morning or preparing a meal, finding ways to make your home safer or helping you choose adaptive equipment, or working on managing stress, memory, or communication — they'll help you build or regain the skills that make everyday life enjoyable and help keep you as independent as possible. Occupational therapy covers a wide range of areas including:

- **Physical Challenges Related to daily functioning**

In this area they focus on improving fine motor skills, the small but mighty movements that let you do things like button a shirt, use utensils, write clearly, or handle tools and crafts. These skills may seem unimportant, but they make a big difference in daily life.

- **Adapting to your Environment**

Occupational therapists will take a look at your home setup to see how it can better support your daily life. Maybe the stairs could use railings, or your bathroom might be safer with grab bars. Keeping in mind accessibility and safety insight and recommendations in this area these can help you move around more confidently, comfortably, and independently.

They can also guide you (and your family) through choosing and using any helpful tools or adaptive equipment, like walkers, wheelchairs, or even special utensils. It's not just about having the right equipment but knowing how to use it in a way that fits your routine and helps you feel more independent.

- **Cognitive/Emotional Support**

If memory, focus, or other thinking skills are getting in the way of daily life, Occupational therapists can help. They work on practical strategies to boost attention and memory, so daily tasks feel more manageable and less overwhelming.

They also support you or your loved one in developing healthy coping strategies to manage stress, anxiety, or low mood — helping you feel more in control and emotionally balanced.

If communication is a challenge, they can help with that too. Whether it's finding ways to express yourself more clearly or feeling more comfortable interacting with others, we'll work together to build confidence and connection.

How to access an Occupational Therapist

There are two routes you can go if you want to connect with an Occupational Therapist, public or private.

- **Public services** are often available through hospitals, community health centers, or programs covered by provincial or territorial health services. You might need a referral from your doctor, and there could be a bit of a wait, but it's usually free or low-cost. One of the more common points of contact with an Occupational Therapist when you are older or have Parkinson's is through Home Care.

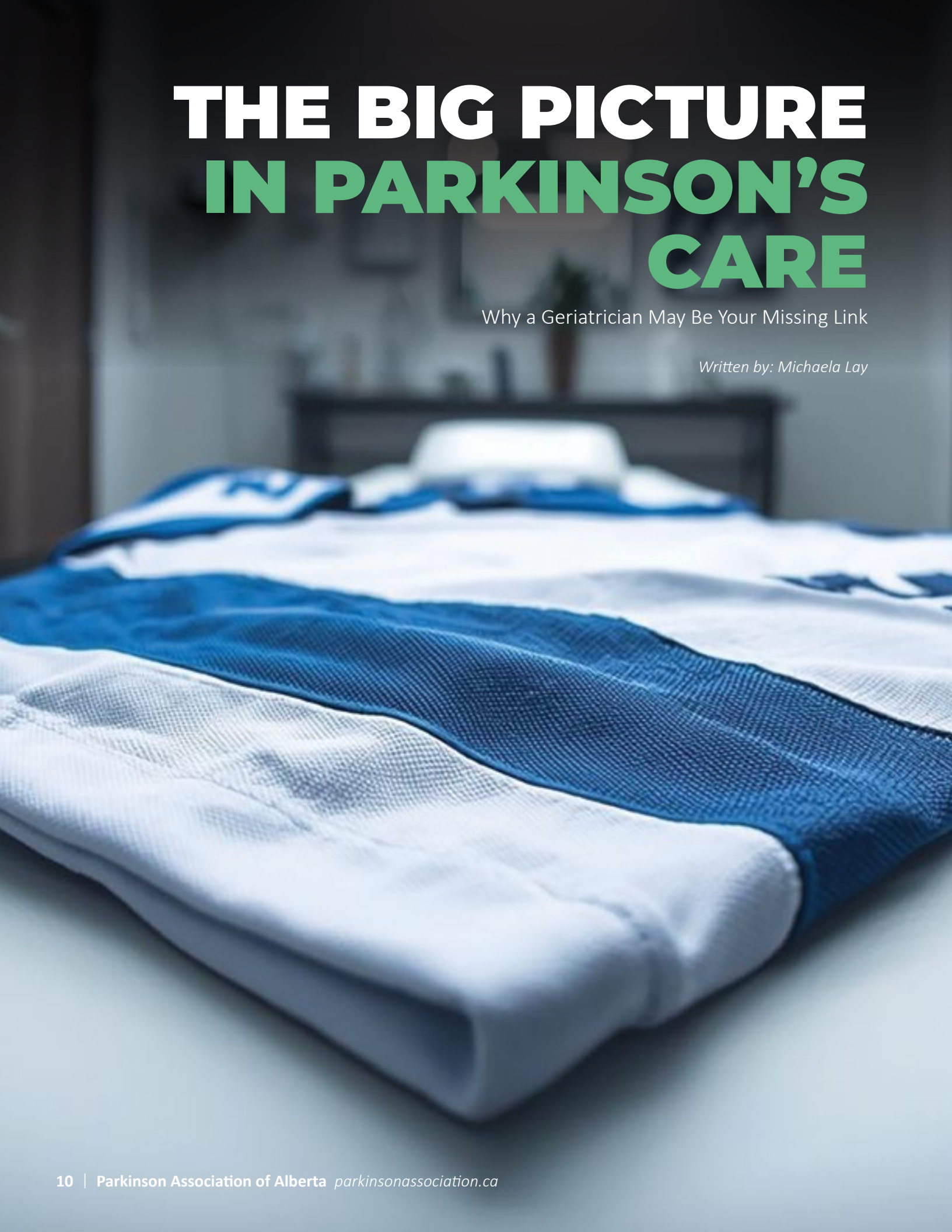
- **Public services** give you more flexibility — you can choose who you work with and often get started more quickly. These services have a fee; however, some costs might be covered by insurance or benefits. Check with your insurance provider to see what your policy covers. It is important to note that private Occupational Therapists may not be as widely available as other allied health professionals such as physiotherapists.

Consider an Occupational Therapist a purveyor of independence! These health care professionals can be tremendously helpful in supporting people in regaining/maintaining independence and participating fully in daily life, addressing physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges through activities and strategies that promote well-being and quality of life. ■

THE BIG PICTURE IN PARKINSON'S CARE

Why a Geriatrician May Be Your Missing Link

Written by: Michaela Lay



What is a Geriatrician

Most of our clients when they find us at Parkinson Association of Alberta are aware that neurologists are typically the specialists that treat Parkinson disease. However, many people in our community don't know about Geriatricians. Geriatricians are doctors who specialize in caring for older adults (typically over 65) and are experts in age related health issues and how your Parkinson diagnosis may affect other conditions you already live with or may develop as you age. Looking at the big picture of your health today and as you age. A geriatrician will look at your overall physical, mental, social and emotional functioning and come up with a plan to address not only Parkinson disease symptoms, but co-existing conditions, medication interactions, social supports and fall risks. This "whole person" approach to preventative care has the potential to greatly reduce ER visits and hospital admissions. A geriatrician is a great option if you are over 65, living with more than one condition or managing multiple medications that may have interactions. Geriatricians also play an important role in assessing frailty concerns before they become emergent.

Geriatricians work out of hospitals with in-patients and in the emergency departments, senior's clinics and geriatric assessment centres, this gives them the ability to consult with a multi-disciplinary team to support your overall health. In addition to publicly funded programs, Geriatricians in some of the bigger municipal centres work out of private centres where you can pay to access their services.

Geriatricians often play a key role in identifying subtle health changes that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, they can screen for mild cognitive impairment or depression—both of which are more common in Parkinson disease—and connect you or your loved one to mental health resources, physical therapists, or occupational therapists early on. Early intervention can help maintain independence, improve quality of life, and reduce emergency room visits. They can also discuss advance care planning in a supportive, client-focused way, ensuring that your wishes guide future health decisions.

Geriatrician vs Gerontologist

You may know someone who has seen a Gerontologist and wondered: Is Gerontology the same as Geriatrics? Gerontology is the study of all facets of aging and Gerontologists are anyone who studies or works with the aging population – this could be Geriatricians, as well as geriatric nurses, specialized social workers, scientists, researchers, physical therapists or academics. All these professionals could potentially be a part of your allied health team in some capacity.

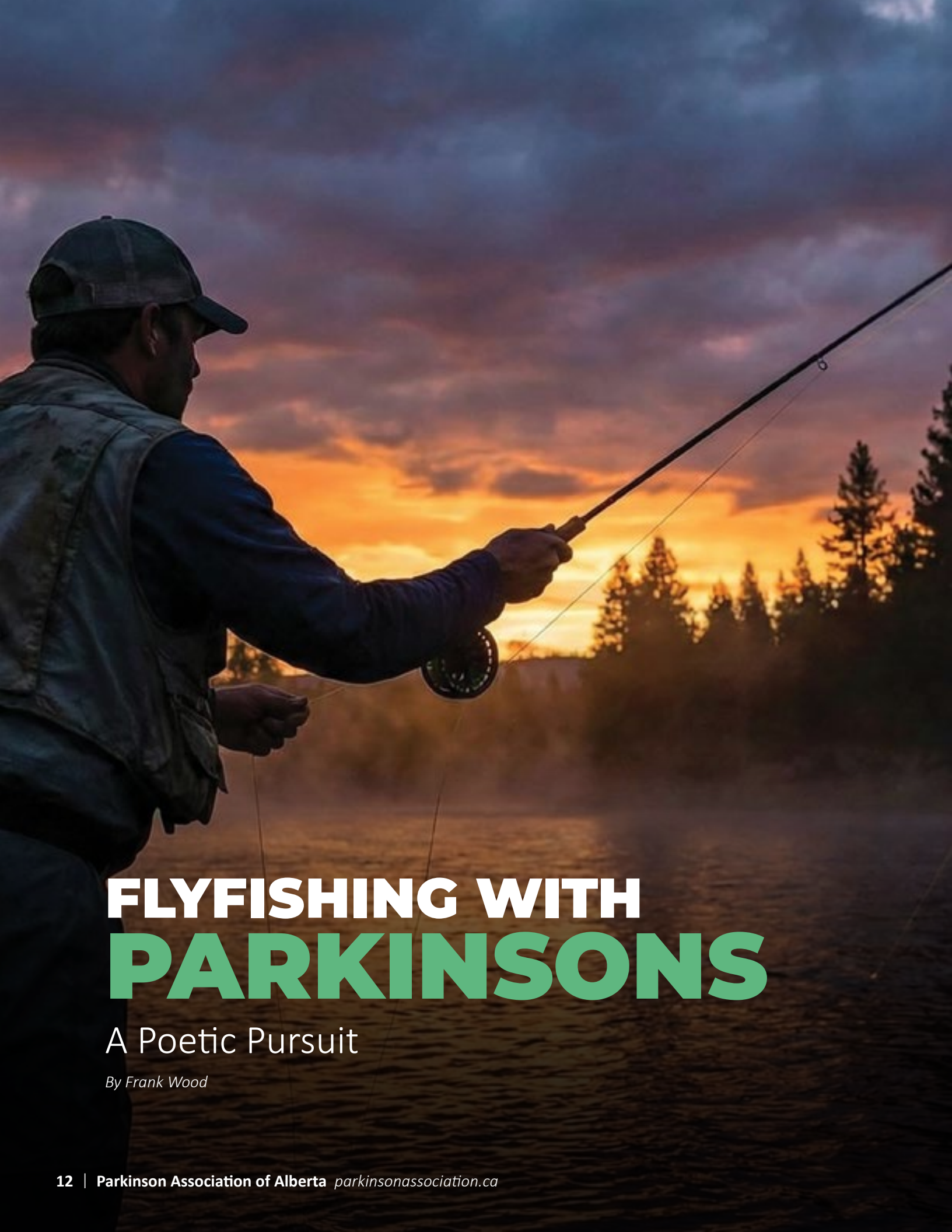
How to find a Geriatrician

Your general practitioner or nurse practitioner can make a referral to a geriatrician or a geriatric assessment clinic depending on your individual needs and health goals. If you do not have a family doctor, a walk-in clinic practitioner may be able to make the appropriate referral for you.

With only approximately 300 geriatricians practicing in Canada currently and only about 20 in Alberta, 1 or 2 in Saskatchewan and none currently practicing in the territories access can be difficult, however initiatives are popping up across the country to bridge the gap in care as our population ages. Some family doctors have Care of the Elderly (COE) specializations which affords them extra knowledge and consideration when caring for older adults, any physician or nurse practitioner can help you find a family doctor with a COE specialization. As our population ages geriatrician's will hopefully become a more popular, and readily available choice for care in our communities.

Final Thoughts

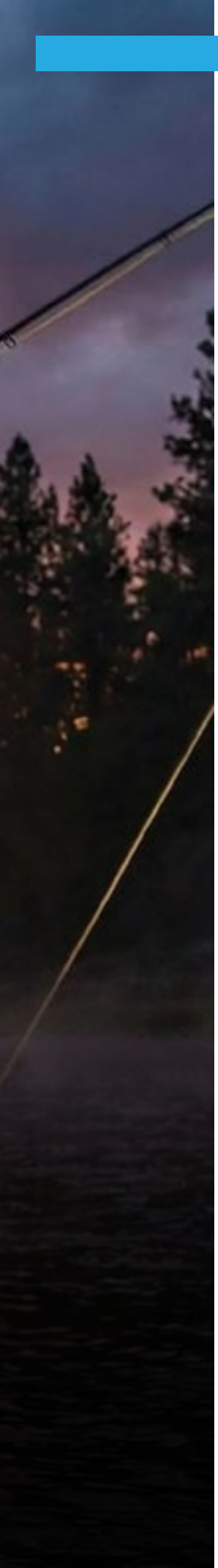
Parkinson's doesn't just affect movement it can touch every corner of health as we age. Add in other medical conditions or age-related concerns and it can become complicated to manage alone. That's where geriatricians shine. By weaving physical, cognitive, and emotional care into one plan, their "big-picture" approach works to keep people safer, stronger, and more connected. Because aging well means living fully, not just managing symptoms. If you have further questions about how a geriatrician may be able to help you or your loved one or how to access them, please do not hesitate to reach out to the client services team at Parkinson Association of Alberta to help guide you. ■



FLYFISHING WITH PARKINSONS

A Poetic Pursuit

By Frank Wood



I don't spring from bed like I used to, More like a creaky drawbridge…. maybe two.

My legs don't work like they did before, My knees debate what steps are for. I wade with care; I walk with pride - And a fancy stick I used to deride.

Some call it weakness, I call it grit. If I fall down, well I just rest a bit. My bones protest, my joints resist- My body's listing like a drunken ship in mist.

But I rise up slow, with boots in hand, To chase a trout, not fame, not land. I've got Parkinson's, and it's here to stay- But by God, I still fish anyway.

And the creek don't care, So I stumble along in the mountain air.

Now casting ain't what it used to be- It's more negotiation than artistry. My hands shake like leaves in fall, And my fly lands where it pleases, if at all.

But I laugh out loud and cast once more, 'Cause it ain't about the perfect score. It's rhythm, breath, the loop, the line- And a hope that twitches on the brine.

Then comes that tug-sweet mercy, yes! It jerks my arm and clears the mess Of every pill, each stiffened joint, And reminds my soul of life's whole point.

A trout fights hard-just like I do. We're kindred spirits, me and you. It flops, it splashes, it nearly wins- But I reel it in with both my shakin' fins.

I cradle it soft in a riverbed, It stares a moment, then shakes its head. And like regrets and fears I've known, that little trout just swims on home.

I don't keep 'em now. That part is done. I fish for peace, not weight or "fun." I keep the stillness, not the meat- It's quiet joy that makes life sweet.

I sit at the truck with sore ol' feet, Boots off, thermos warm, the day complete. The sun dips low, my breath runs deep, The kind of tired a man can keep.

I may shake and shuffle, trip and strain, But I'll come back here again, again. 'Cause Parkinson's don't own my name- It just rides along. I still play the game.

So here's to fishin' with hands that shake, To stubborn hearts that never break. To wadin' slow and casting far- And leavin' all your pain in the reservoir.

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Other Professionals for Your Care Team

Written By: Brett Leclaire

> *Your Parkinson's Care Team is a constantly evolving group of experts there to help you along your journey.*

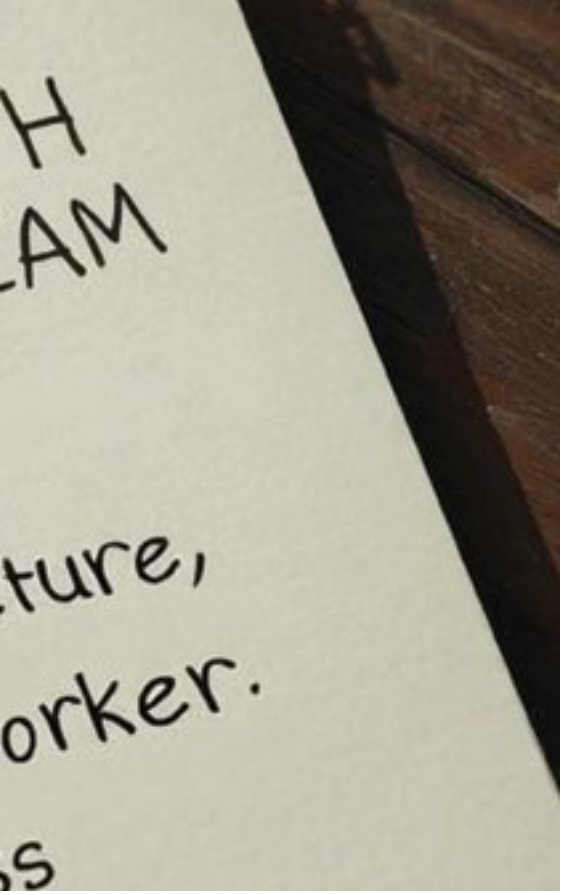
In both Volume 1 and now here in Volume 2 we have identified a number of experts to consider including as a part of your Team; but there are also a whole host of additional professionals you can call on to focus on aspects of wellbeing that family doctors, neurologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc. don't necessarily fully address.

Complementary Therapies

With both Parkinson's and/or aging your body can throw you for a loop on both good and bad days. This can mean experiencing pain, struggling to move, or feeling like you're "creaking" more then you should. This can sometimes indicate that your body is asking for some way to relax tight muscles or relieve some of your built-up stress. Did you know there are professionals for that?!? Massage therapists, acupuncturists, or chiropractors can all be great supports that may be able to help you manage these issues. A relaxation massage can be an enjoyable way to loosen those tight or sore muscles; it can also help you feel less stressed or tired following a long week. To supplement care, you might be interested in acupuncture which can help manage some wider health considerations like pain management, reducing stiffness, or even digestive health. And let's not forget about what is keeping as upright. Our back is a core component of our body and one that takes a lot of wear and tear, a chiropractic appointment may be a way to help get our back, back on track.

Exercise & Fitness

We talk a lot about exercise, what is best, how much, and how to stay safe while doing it. What if you included some people on your Team that could support you in that area? To help you keep moving, stay active and healthy, and (if done in a group setting) be social! Trainers, program facilitators, or exercise class leaders are great supports to motivate you to keep getting out for the exercise that is so vital to living well. They make sure you are keeping proper form, targeting the right muscles, and exercising for the right amount of time. They can also help motivate us to push back against that feeling of not wanting to get out of the house – especially in winter



or when struggling with apathy. Having someone to encourage you to get out moving at regular times can reduce the chances of you getting stuck in a rut.

Help at Home

Another professional we might not think about being a part of our team is a homecare case manager. These managers are the individuals that coordinate one's care when accessing homecare services. When looking at potential additions to your Care Team; a homecare case manager is a great individual who knows how to get you connected with services that can help you and/or your loved one stay at home, SAFELY, longer. As symptoms change, additional help may be necessary at home. Having them on your team can be likened to having a bridge between healthcare providers, community services, and yourself so that care is organized, timely, and tailored to your individual needs.

Head to Toe

What should be considered under health but often is seen as separate when we think about health and healthcare professionals are eyes and feet... Optometrists, Ophthalmologists and Podiatrists. An Optometrist is your primary eye care provider – think eye exams, common eye conditions, prescribing glasses/contacts. An Ophthalmologist is a medical doctor who focuses on complex eye issues and performs surgeries (like cataract removal). Your eyes are one of your best connections to the world, and experiencing changes in vision or eye health can leave you feeling disconnected. Taking care of your eyes is an important part of maintaining overall health and, for people with Parkinson's, who can have symptoms that effects vision, it is extra important to have these professionals in your corner. Moving to the bottom of your body, a podiatrist is a healthcare professional who specializes in one's foot and ankle health. Podiatrists can provide preventive care, recommend supportive footwear or orthotics, and help us maintain safe, comfortable movement to keeps us being able to do the things we love.

While core medical professionals guide overall treatment, these additional complimentary experts help address the everyday challenges that do not always fit neatly into a clinic appointment. Each one of these professionals offer different options that can help to support you on your journey. And even if you don't need to access them now, they are important to be aware of them in case things change. If you would like to get connected with any of these supports please contact our client services team. ■

THE GOALS WE REACH FOR:
MARILYN'S JOURNEY

Written by Lex Harrison

For more than three decades, Marilyn Nickless built her life around learning. Not only her own, but the kind she sparked in the minds of children. She grew up in a home where creativity and curiosity were part of daily life. That early foundation of imagination would later shape her warm, lively presence in the classroom.

Today, at 65, Marilyn is living with Multiple System Atrophy (MSA), a rare and aggressive form of atypical Parkinsonism. But even as her sight fades, and her balance falters, Marilyn's outlook remains positive. Her life is still anchored in the same principle that shaped her career: Find the good. Build joy. Keep showing up.

A Career Built on Compassion

Marilyn began her teaching journey in 2000 by stepping into a classroom and working with special needs children with autism, learning disabilities, and complex behavioral challenges. She supported so many kids, including one boy from Grades 1 through 9, and became such an integral part of his school life that years later he asked her to be his grad partner. Today, he is a science student at university.

"That makes me proud," she says with a smile, "even though I'm not his mother—I still feel that pride."

After 15 years, Marilyn transitioned to kindergarten, where she spent the rest of her career crafting and teaching lifelong lessons. One of her signature tricks was making healthy eating fun by drawing a rotary dial on the peel of a banana and holding it to her ear. Soon, every child wanted a turn on the "banana phone." More bananas started appearing in lunch kits. Parents arrived at parent-teacher interviews baffled. Even now, long after those students have grown into adults, they wave at her in grocery stores and joke, "Mrs. Nickless, I still have my banana phone."

Finding Support Where Others Said "No"

In 2023, Marilyn was diagnosed with MSA. Her first months after were very difficult without support. "We called everywhere. So many places said, 'No, you're terminal. We can't help you.'" Then she contacted the Parkinson Association of Alberta. "Charlene said, 'Just come in. We'll take you.' And that was the first 'yes' I'd heard."

Since then, Marilyn has joined PAA's atypical Parkinsonism support groups, monthly Zoom meetings, social gatherings, and chair-based dance classes. "And every week they say, 'Great job, Marilyn!' even when I know I'm not great. But that positive feedback, that keeps me coming back."

After 18 weeks of classes, she stood on her toes for the first time.

"That was huge. That was hope."

A Partner in Every Step

Marilyn's husband, Allan, is her constant and strongest supporter. He helps her walk; he reads labels she

can't see; he rebuilt their new home—after they left their longtime four-level split—into an accessible bungalow with a walk-in shower and safe pathways.

Together, they also began baking pies to raise money for PAA's Parkinson's programs.

"We picked the berries, bought the supplies, even handmade each pie crust. Every dollar goes to PAA to help others with Parkinson's."

Last year, in just three weeks, they raised $800.

A Message to Others Newly Diagnosed

When Marilyn talks to people who have just received a life-changing diagnosis, her advice is: "Find somebody who's going to listen to you. It took me 6 months to find somebody that was going to say come, we love you."

She encourages others to try PAA's programs, socials, exercise groups, and anything that gets them connected. "Showing up counts," she says. "Even if you can't do everything—just show up." For Marilyn, that willingness to keep moving forward is vital; as she often says, "You always need another goal to reach for."

Embracing Joy Along the Path Ahead

While MSA made Marilyn retire from a job she loved deeply, she still visits her school whenever she can, crafting Christmas decorations with students or assembling memory scrapbooks—50 of them over the years—filled with photos, art, and milestones.

And she refuses to let negativity take root.

"I get down sometimes, yes," she says. "But not for long. I was raised to stay positive. Life's too short."

Marilyn's hope is simple: that more people become aware of MSA and the real experiences of those living with it. In sharing her journey, she continues to illuminate the path for others, just as she did for so many students throughout her remarkable career. ■

ARTA
ALBERTA RETIRED TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

THE JOY OF BEING HEARD

Speech-language pathologists

Written by: Janelle Morrison,

Speech-language pathologist and instructor at Norquest College

What is a Speech-Language Pathologist?

According to Speech Language and Audiology Canada, Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are health professionals who identify, diagnose, and treat communication and swallowing disorders across the lifespan. SLPs offer a wide range of services to many individuals with varying diagnoses. These services include working on speech sound production, tone, expression, language understanding and expression, literacy skills, feeding and swallowing, alternative and augmentative communication, and oral rehab.

There are multiple practice settings in which speech-language pathologists can work. Some of these include hospitals, schools, private practice, community programs, long-term care facilities, clients' homes, universities/colleges, and more. SLPs also have the opportunity to provide care online. Many SLPs work as a part of interdisciplinary teams, collaborating with other health professionals. These other professionals include audiologists, nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, and psychologists. Speech-language pathologists may also practice privately in their own independent practice's.

How does Parkinson Disease impact communication and swallowing?

Changes in voice and speech is common in Parkinson's, many notice changes in voice and speech early on in their Parkinson journey. Common challenges include a soft or quiet voice, changes in tone for example flat, slurred, or mumbled speech. In addition, choking and other swallowing difficulties, also known as dysphagia, are common in people with Parkinson. People with Parkinson Disease may experience the feeling or sensation that food is caught in the throat, coughing or choking while eating or drinking, difficulty swallowing, and excess or insufficient saliva. In addition to changes in speech, voice, and swallowing, for some people changes in cognition can make it harder to find the right words, focus on conversations, or get a sentence started. Sometimes, limited facial expression or reduced or unintended body language can also cause miscommunications.

The primary approach to managing speech, voice, and swallowing difficulties is working with a SLP. SLPs are trained to do assessments and treat issues with speech, voice, language, and communication, including those linked to cognitive changes. SLPs also specialize in diagnosing and treating swallowing disorders. During an evaluation, an SLP will review medical history and examine facial muscles, as well as movement of the lips, tongue, and jaw. They will also assess speech, voice, and swallowing abilities. An SLP can help work on voice, speech clarity, swallowing, and cognitive changes that may come along with Parkinson Disease, this is done through individual and/or group therapy sessions.

Where can you access an SLP in Alberta?

Alberta Health Services (AHS) offers publicly funded SLP services in different settings. This includes in-patient and outpatient services. This can look like individual support sessions or group therapy sessions. What is available depends on location and services needed. Majority of publicly funded SLP services through AHS can be self-referred too. Some programs may require a referral from a health care professional like a general practitioner, nurse or nurse practitioner, occupational therapist, or social worker. Service listings can be found on AHS website or through 811 or 211. You can also connect with us a Parkinson Association of Alberta for help finding and accessing SLP services.

Another option is private SLP services, you can search through the Alberta Speech-Language

Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) to find a private practice SLP in Alberta. Private services can be costly, some insurance and benefits plans may provide certain amounts of coverage for SLP services. You can also search on the Alberta College of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (ACSLPA) website by checking the public register. This has information on all registered Audiologists and Speech Language Pathologists in Alberta and Northwest Territories. If outside of Alberta or the Northwest Territories each province has its own college with similar public registry lists.

Final thoughts

For people living with Parkinson's, changes in speech, voice, and swallowing can feel like barriers to everyday life. That is where speech-language pathologists' step in bringing expertise, creativity, and compassion to help promote clarity, safety, and confidence. Through tailored therapy, SLPs support stronger voices, smoother conversations, and safer meals. At its core, SLP support is about preserving connection, dignity, and the simple joy of being heard. ■

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

The continuing journey of Fiona and Garry Swanson

Written by: Christina Kim

"Good morning, Beautiful."

It's the same message Garry sent Fiona every day when they first met – and now, ten years into marriage, it's still the first thing she hears every morning. Together, they've faced the world as a team, travelling from the beaches in Mexico to the stands at Wimbledon. This was not long after Fiona was diagnosed with Parkinson disease (PD) at 40 years old, more than 15 years ago.

Fiona & Garry participating in the Parkinson's Step 'n Stride in Calgary, AB

At the time, Fiona hadn't met Garry yet and only knew about PD as she's seen it first-hand with her father. She'd watched it slowly take her father, diagnosed with Lewy Bodies, and she feared what would come. Fiona and Garry made the promise to get the most of life together before their journey was ultimately on the same path as her fathers.

Amidst all the travelling, Fiona was still attending her regular neurologist appointments and adjusting life to her life with Parkinson's. In 2022, she was told she would be a good candidate for Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS)*. It was wonderful news, but neither she nor Garry anticipated the stress and anxiety that would follow, especially for Garry.

As Fiona's care partner, Garry could see how much potential the DBS surgery could have to improve Fiona's PD symptoms. But the lengthy psychological, cognitive, and physical testing process took a toll on them both. Each assessment carried the fear that one setback could deem Fiona unfit for the procedure and close off this path entirely.

After a year filled with uncertainty, their hope prevailed! Fiona was approved and went through the DBS procedure. The surgery drastically improved her physical symptoms but unexpectedly, completely changed her cognitive and mental health. Her Parkinson's symptoms looked different, her medications changed, her needs were different. The way they've adapted the past decade no longer worked and they had to find different ways to manage and live. It was like living through her Parkinson's diagnosis all over. She returned to that feeling of her not knowing what the next steps are or what life would look like. But this time she had Garry.

Fiona & Garry at the Calgary Stampede, AB

Garry & Fiona at Wimbleton
London, England

Since the surgery, they've taken a step back from travelling and put their attention on their community close to home. Fiona preaches to children at her church and volunteers at her local Legion. Garry is fully immersed in Fiona's life whether it's making 3D prints to add on to her stories at Sunday school or planning unique surprises for Fiona on their next travel destinations.

With more time at home, Garry found time to fulfill his lifelong dream of developing an app and trying to solve the gaps with Fiona's symptom management. As Fiona's care partner for the past decade, he's seen the ups and downs of Fiona's Parkinson's. Going to appointments, monitoring medications, tracking sleep, Garry's been there every step of the way. He created My CareCycle**, an interactive journal app that helps Fiona track her Parkinson's symptoms and medication schedule. The app allows her to log her mood, record how long medications last, measure the intensity of symptoms, and track other types of information related to Parkinson disease. Best of all, everything can be printed and shared directly with her neurologist.

Through every stage, Fiona and Garry have written their story together, one day and one "Good morning, Beautiful" at a time. As newlyweds, they envisioned life as a three-act play, aware of how the story might end. The DBS surgery has rewritten their script, and now they get to write the next chapter for themselves.

Instead of long flights and far-off beaches, they find joy in small, steady moments — Fiona teaching at Sunday school, Garry perfecting a new feature for his app, My CareCycle. Their journey has become less about where they go and more about how they grow. ■

> Want to learn more about Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS)? Reach out to our Client Services team or register to take part in our Advanced Treatment Options 101. Wondering if DBS might be a good option for you? Please speak with your treating neurologist.

My Care Cycle is available for everyone on the App Store for $14.99 one-time fee

UPCOMING EVENTS 2026

Parkinson Awareness Month **APRIL**

Stand Up to Parkinson's Events **APRIL 11**

Annual General Meeting & One of a Kind Brunch **MAY 30**

Classics for a Cause 2 **MAY 31**

Save the Dates

Parkinson Association of Alberta

Wellness Retreat for Parkinson's **TBD**

Step 'n Stride Yellowknife **SEPT 12**

Step 'n Stride Alberta **SEPT 19&20**

Hope Conference **NOV 7**

View our full program and event calendars at *parkinsonassociation.ca* for the latest updates.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