

## **Northern Alberta pharmacists finding a way to meet patient needs during wildfire crisis**

Written by Marie Powell on June 17, 2019 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca

Two of three out-of-control fires that threatened northern Alberta towns continue to burn

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Photo by Jan M. Welke

High Level, Alta. – As wildfires rage across northern Alberta, local pharmacists are finding unique ways to meet the healthcare needs of their patients and support first responders.

At one point three “out of control” fires threatened High Level (pop. 3,100), about 800 km north of Edmonton. The largest, Chuckegg Creek, grew in size to over 280,000 hectares. Smoke has been affecting air quality and reducing visibility, reaching into Manitoba and the northern U.S.

By May 20, fires had knocked out power in the town, and the mandatory evacuation began. When pharmacist Jan Welke stopped by the arena to register, it seemed very controlled and well organized with “no sense of panic,” but something caused him to step up.

"I just had a feeling I should stay," he said. Welke has been a pharmacist in High Level since he graduated University of Alberta in 1996. In 2009, he and wife Cheryl purchased the High Level IDA, and last year they added Fort Vermilion Pharmasave with other partners. As the only community pharmacy in town, he offered his services. Initially asked to stay 12 hours, it was soon extended to more than full time.

One of his first jobs was to load necessities like baby formula, diapers, sandwiches, and snacks onto the school buses to help people leaving town. An "unprecedented" task force of agencies worked together to assess and handle the situation, controlling access with wristbands and passwords. Like other volunteers, Welke stayed in his house.

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The evacuation began on the Monday after the May long weekend, adding those concerns to the usual post-long-weekend increase in business. The two high-volume community pharmacies serve about a 150-km radius area. About 2,000 people to the north and west remained "stuck in behind the fire," as Welke described it. He contacted the trucking companies he normally deals with, and the truck drivers returned to transport prescriptions as well as other supplies from the town.

Kathy Parsons, pharmacy technician, spotted patients expressing concerns on Facebook and called in to offer her services.

"On the first day, while the power was still out, we made two compounds for a special needs child who's tube fed," Welke said, "in the dark with flashlights and hand-written labels." On the same day, Welke had to supply a methadone prescription that could not have been provided by another pharmacist or hospital.

Welke established office space in the town office and powered up his laptop in his truck during the 36-hour power outage, so he could interact with pharmacies in other areas. "In hindsight, we've now got generators," he added.

Although the store itself was not open, they were so busy Welke ended up giving out his personal cell phone number.

"We would take orders all day, and then drive out past the checkpoints every night to deliver the prescriptions to people out there. We'd ask everybody to please be prompt at 7 pm because we can't leave anything out there for pickup. So everybody would meet us in the parking lot, and we'd hand everything out."

About 10,000 people were evacuated from northern Alberta during this crisis. When Fort Vermilion became an evacuation point, business tripled at Pharmasave, where pharmacists Keyur Shah (co-owner), Dhruvit Patel, and Viral Shah set up.

"We were preparing a lot of emergency medications on the fly," said Keyur Shah, who immigrated there from India about 15 months ago.

Staff returned to work at both stores. Patients were worried about their homes and in shock, he said, so trained staff familiar with medical needs and histories proved essential. For example, Shah's knowledge of one senior patient's history helped him prevent a potential allergic reaction to her new prescription.

Kaitlin Rafuse, volunteer firefighter and hospital pharmacist at Northwest Health Centre, said this situation offered opportunities for more unique collaborations than usual.

"During this time of crisis, we were definitely relying on each other." For example, when the power went out, they set up a mini-community-pharmacy within the Fort Vermilion hospital. "You definitely can't anticipate the problems and the troubleshooting that you'll have to do," she adds.

As well as prescriptions, people needed toiletries, cough and cold products, bandages, and even shaving items. News reports carried stories of firefighters from B.C. and even Nova Scotia joining what Welke estimates as about 700 firefighters fighting the blaze.

"I can't imagine not having been here, if I would have shut my doors and left," he said. "I would say for a community pharmacist, in a situation like this, to be prepared to consider themselves essential."

After close to two weeks of mandatory evacuation, High Level residents were allowed back home on June 3. The town remained under an eight-hour evacuation alert until June 11, when it changed to a state of local emergency June 12. As of June 17, two wildfires remained out of control in the High Level Forest Area.

"It's not like, the fire just erupts, and then it gets under control, and everybody comes home," Welke said. "This thing is still kind of on our doorstep."

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