



THE FERTILITY CLINIC THAT WENT DIGITAL DURING THE PANDEMIC

How the Pacific Centre for Reproductive Medicine used tech to adapt

When the pandemic shut down all of their clinics in the third week of March 2020, the first thought that came to mind for the Pacific Centre for Reproductive Medicine (PCRM) was the care of their patients.

“It was devastating,” recalls Dr. Caitlin Dunne, one of the fertility clinic’s co-directors, about the sudden shutdown, which interrupted or delayed treatment for many patients. “It was a real heart-ache, because many of our patients had been trying for years to get pregnant,” she says. “They finally were on track to do fertility treatment—starting to see a potential light at the end of the tunnel—and then that was put on hold indefinitely.”

When they were able to re-open safely, nearly three months later, PCRM was better poised than most to practise medicine in a COVID climate. As Canada’s largest independently owned fertility clinic, they’re headquartered in Burnaby, but have six locations across B.C. and Alberta. “We’ve always been forward-looking,” says Dunne, “and having multiple locations drove us to be digital even before the pandemic.” That meant, for example, keeping patient records in a way that they could be seamlessly accessed across locations and digitised consent forms—a far cry from the clipboard-and-pen situation from other healthcare settings. “We also already created online resources like videos, so when patients couldn’t visit us in person to learn how to do their injections, that was already online,” says Dunne, referring to the hormone shots that can be a part of several of the treatments they offer, including IVF. Even their identification for the embryos and specimens in their clinic is touchless, using QR codes and radio frequency identification. “All of these innovations made us really well prepared to pivot digitally,

which was fortunate,” says Dunne, noting that safety precautions, like wearing PPE and frequent disinfection, were already second nature to the highly trained staff.

One of the silver linings in shifting to digital meant that, for the first time, PCRM could offer virtual consultations. “This has opened up accessibility for people who live in remote communities,” she says, adding that for many, the nearest specialist is hours, if not days, away. “It’s really expanded our reach,” says Dunne, “because those people don’t have to get on a plane to come see me anymore, or pay privately for a specialist phone consultation, which was not covered by provincial healthcare prior to COVID.”

In every interaction, Dunne and her team do their best to make sure every patient gets the tailored, supportive care they need. “Oftentimes, infertility is very isolating,” she says, calling out the shame and stigma that can be associated with a diagnosis. “People will be in my office having dealt with infertility on their own for years.” There’s nothing she loves more than being able to say to one of these patients: “You’re in the right place. There are things we can do to help you, and it’s going to be okay.”

Whether virtually or in-person, however, PCRM’s mission has not wavered since its founding. “Our purpose is to build families,” says Dunne. “I can’t tell you how happy it makes every member of our team when patients send us pictures, and say, ‘Here’s the baby you helped create.’ We’ve been doing this for 15 years, and that never gets old.”