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Researcher wants to improve health care for elderly

BY GREG MERCER, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — For too many seniors, health care means dealing with a small army of specialists: one for their heart, another for eye sight, one for hearing and another still for mobility.

They're treated as if these ailments of aging occur in isolation. And that needs to change, says Dr. George Heckman, the latest catch for the Schlegel-University of Waterloo Research Institute for Aging.

Heckman was trotted out yesterday as the chair in geriatric medicine for the institute, which is a partnership between a local philanthropist and retirement homeowner, UW and Conestoga College. The institute courted the McMaster University researcher-physician for more than a year and a half before finally luring him to Waterloo.

Heckman will eventually begin training the next generation of physicians at The Waterloo Regional Campus of the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine. He'll also perform research designed to benefit frail seniors, in partnership with local retirement homes and hospitals.

He told a crowd that health care for the elderly can be done better — too many seniors sit on wait lists for treatment, others simply can't access the services they need, he said. Others still are handled by a long list of doctors who treat only one ailment, he said, advocating a more holistic approach.

Heckman says we need to focus more on preventing the chronic diseases that afflict seniors, whether they choose to live at home or in a nursing care centre. Treating them before they develop these problems can take the pressure off hospital ERs and long-term care facilities, he said.

"We need to look after seniors in a way that's effective and works for them," he said. "We need to do things out of the box."

As the region's resident expert on geriatric medicine, Heckman will work closely with the Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network, the body that administers local hospitals, community health centres and long-term care homes. That means his findings can be applied in real settings more quickly than a typical university researcher.

The aging institute research chairs are part of a unique partnership between the university, college, local hospitals and retirement homes. Ron Schlegel, a former professor at UW who co-owns Oakwood Retirement Homes, has donated \$6 million to the institute to develop experts who can help the elderly age better.

He said he hopes the institute can begin to change the way people think about aging — from the way we treat the frail to the emphasis we put on promoting preventive medicine.

"I think it's all about changing attitudes," he said. "It's about looking at the total person, but it's also about looking at our lifestyles and environments, rather than saying 'I don't look after myself, and I'll go to the doctor when things go wrong'."

A top official from Grand River and St. Mary's hospitals, which are also partners in the project, hailed the work as one of a kind.

"This is the beginning of a new era for elderly care in this region," said Dr. Ashok Sharma, chief of staff for the two hospitals. "No one else has done this."

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Mathew McCarthy, Record staff
Dr. George Heckman speaks during a media conference at The Village of Winston Park on Tuesday.

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