

The Community Clinic Conquest



When Peter Ruttan was busy training to be a physiotherapist, he likely never thought he'd one day be directing the health of people outside of a clinical role. More than 12 years later, that's exactly where he's landed as the director of human resources at

pt Health, Canada's largest and fastest growing health-care company. And now, his patients are his employees.

Like all of pt Health's original upper management, Ruttan started out as an independent physiotherapist, growing his business from one location to five in a few short years. But by the fifth location, the demand of over-seeing different clinics and treating patients became overwhelming.

It was at that time that a collective of practices and founders, including Ruttan, decided to join together to cofound pt Health, creating a bigger footprint in the market while maintaining the feel of a grassroots community clinic. As cofounder, Ruttan quickly stepped into operations, helping grow the practice quickly from 30 to 80 clinics. Today, pt Health operates more than 100 clinics across Canada and supports a network of 200.

Two years of rapid growth made it clear to Ruttan that an official human resources program and more structure were needed to ensure a consistent patient and employee experience. The organization decided that Ruttan would lead the charge. So Ruttan moved from operations into the newly defined HR position to manage the organization's growing employee base and the pt Health brand. "When we decided to start an HR department, we realized that the

Director of HR Peter Ruttan is working to make pt Health the country's premier provider of physiotherapy by creating a network of local health centres

BY **BRANDY GONSOULIN**

product was our people," says Ruttan, "This helped shape the company growth, and HR laid the groundwork. It is the core of our culture."

To build on that groundwork and offer the support and security of a corporate company while still staying true to their grassroots mission, Ruttan started by establishing an employee benefits plan that offered health coverage, a rarity in the industry, he says. The next part was to invest in an information system to keep track of employees and to develop training and onboarding systems that ensured consistency of care across all regional locations. Ruttan also took care to make the program accessible to all employees online. He helped drive the new training using video, print materials, and an online test that tracked competency to see which employees had completed training across each clinic. The new system could now formally track existing employees and standardize onboarding training. "By making sure that systems were in place, we shaped that employee experience and set the tone of cultural excellence," Ruttan says.

Once training was in place, the program needed to be monitored across an average of 300 new-patient assessments per day while still recognizing the autonomy of each of the separate clinics. This was achieved through implementing a thorough patient feedback form after a patient's first and last visit. According to Ruttan,



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Director of HR
pt Health

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PHOTO: DON LESAR



Newly graduated physiotherapists and their experienced mentors meet in Dunchurch, Ontario, for a staff "Cottage Weekend" retreat

employees originally questioned the initiative but came to celebrate the tool as it allowed employees and individual clinics to directly manage their patients' needs. In most cases, employees were rewarded with positive feedback and recognition, something Ruttan says is uncommon in health care. If patient feedback reaches a critical point, Ruttan can step in as needed for support.

This feedback and attention to consistency have led to a 94-percent recommendation rate for the health-care group among an average of 3,500 daily patient treatments. "Attracting feedback is important," says Ruttan. "In health care, most patients just leave if they don't have a good experience, but at pt Health, the patient feedback model helps provide useful feedback that leads to employee recognition and retention."

The average age of pt Health employees is 32 years old or younger. As part of the training program, new therapists receive a mentor, which has been a big attraction for newcomers as they get the chance to grow. It's also

helped existing employees get the opportunity to learn to lead. Coupled with the patient feedback program, this ensures that therapists are getting the necessary feedback. Additionally, pt Health invests in its employees by offering them resources to finance continuing education that interest them. "It pays off in so many ways," Ruttan explains. "They are happy, we are happy, and they are likely to stay with us."

Additionally, all upper management are also physiotherapists, a structure that Ruttan says is purposeful. "Leadership sets the culture, and when you have leaders that are from the culture itself, there is value." Today, Ruttan is focusing on infrastructure and operations for continued rapid growth, striving to manage the balance between individual and owner-operated clinics, a consistent patient experience, employee training, and culture. "It's a fine line between the things we want to be standardized versus the things we want to be flexible with while not getting in the way of the patient-therapist relationship." ■