

The Health Council of Canada Health Innovation Award

Patient and Practitioner Accountability for a Sustainable Health Care System

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Shortfalls in the Current System

By the end of 2009, Canadian health care expenditures will reach \$5542 per capita; yet, according to the World Health Organization, better health outcomes such as increased life expectancy eventually plateau and, for industrialized nations, life expectancy levels off when health spending per capita exceeds \$1700.^{1,2} If life expectancy is the benchmark, then increased spending will not make a significant difference to Canada's goal of having effective, efficient, and fiscally-responsible health care for future generations; we must consider other solutions. One approach to improving the health care system is to better define the roles and responsibilities of two critical groups, patients and physicians.³ First, to empower patients to better self-assess their need for medical services and second, to hold physicians and other practitioners more accountable for the effectiveness of their medical interventions.

Patient Empowerment

We believe meaningful reform entails patients having stronger connections to the system designed to serve them, as well as being able to take more responsibility for their own health.⁴ Many factors determine an individual's choice to seek medical services.⁵ One of these – patient need – is the catalyst for our call for patient empowerment.

Our health system aims to provide services to all who need care.⁶ According to studies, 72 percent of individuals, though they did not have a chronic health condition, visited their general practitioner in a one-year period.⁵ Furthermore, 75 percent of them believed they were in excellent or good health. This suggests many patient issues were relatively minor and could have been resolved without a doctor. Reform, therefore, would involve enabling more individuals to pursue non-physician routes when seeking access to health care services. Ensuring the sustainability of our health care system requires reducing overall demand for unnecessary

services while ensuring that when they are needed, they can be accessed quickly and to the greatest benefit of the patient.

Assessing whether or not a patient needs medical care is a sensitive issue. Most individuals are insufficiently knowledgeable or capable of assessing their medical requirements but will, understandably, prefer to err on the side of caution and seek medical care. The concern is for those needing but not receiving care in a timely fashion. One way provinces are attempting to address this concern is by implementing health hotlines, providing access to nurses who advise on medical concerns. Saskatchewan's *HealthLine*, for example, directs and coaches the public to the most suitable sources of care.⁷ Nurses make recommendations around self care and whether to visit a health care professional or emergency room.

To date, the effects of this intervention have been positive. In Saskatchewan, more than one-third of calls made to *HealthLine* are made during the day, even when doctors' offices would be open to see patients.⁸ In addition, within a six month period, 6659 people were advised to access other medical services rather than make unnecessary visits to an emergency room.

While use of health hotlines has increased over time, the key to maximizing their benefit is to increase the number of Canadians using them. We believe a key strategy for improving the health care system is much wider promotion and implementation of these triage-like services.

Practitioner Accountability

Despite the fact that the number of physicians has increased over the last five years, a common complaint among Canadians is a shortage of general practitioners.⁹ A population increase of 4.3 percent corresponded to an 8 percent increase in the number of practising physicians; yet, access to this expanding pool seems increasingly constrained, causing Canadians to be concerned their health care needs are not being met.¹⁰

Although the number of doctors would appear sufficient to meet patient demands, it has been suggested that this central resource has been rendered less effective by the inefficiencies in the system and by a lack of information about the services available.¹¹ Both issues can be addressed

in part by examining the issue of physician accountability and by encouraging greater collaboration among health care providers.

First, physicians must be willing to connect more closely with their patients. A plan for better patient care would be for physicians to be more conveniently available for consults and appointments when there is a medical need. We believe it is time for physicians, and indeed all health care professionals, to acknowledge their role in affecting the patient's ability to access timely and effective care. When physicians and other professionals elect to keep shorter hours or are away from their practice due to other commitments, the time they have left for patient care is compromised.⁹

Second, we need to recognize that each health professional has specific knowledge and skills that contribute to quality care. Traditionally, physicians have been protective of their scopes of practice much to the disappointment of other professionals equally capable of providing a health service, and of patients who feel the system is a discordant mass of processes in which they are passed from one to another, and not always with positive results.

In other words, a well-defined and purposeful role for each practitioner is lacking. As the recent *Blueprint for Pharmacy* document suggests, everyone must know what and how one can best utilize his/her expertise for the common and greater good.¹² When one's purpose is well-defined, one's contributions stand to be that much more meaningful and successful.

Conclusion

To renew Canada's health care system such that it will be sustainable for future generations, we believe changes to the responsibilities and attitudes of patients and practitioners are essential. By promoting and giving patients an avenue to take their health into their own hands, we will create an empowered public better able to manage their health care needs and this will allow physicians and other practitioners to offer services to those who truly require it. In addition, all practitioners need to become more accessible and accountable to their patients. By working collaboratively, all health care service providers will be better able to effectively care for their patients.

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