



IMPROVED ACCESS • BETTER CARE • GREATER HEALTH

### Renewing Primary Health Care for British Columbians

With activities underway to strengthen primary health care services in British Columbia, it's important to understand what primary health care is, and how primary care renewal will better meet the needs of patients, doctors, nurses, and other health-care providers.

Primary health care is generally understood as the point at which a person enters the health-care system and receives the health-care services that meet most of their everyday health needs.

### What do most BC patients want from primary health care?

Repeatedly, survey research has shown a similar picture of what people want:

- to see, within a reasonable time frame, the right health-care professional to resolve their health concerns. It might be a doctor, a nurse (in the future, perhaps a nurse practitioner), a dietitian, a counselor, a physiotherapist, a specialist or others;
- a single point of entry into the health-care system from which other types of care can be co-ordinated and scheduled;
- minimal repetition of questions or tests;
- a doctor who works closely and communicates with other types of health-care providers, each of whom is aware of what the other is doing;
- a health professional they can call or see for urgent care, 24 hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week;
- minimal waiting at one level of care for resources to be available at another;

- proactive care in which they are contacted about necessary tests and referred to appropriate services that will provide education and support to prevent illness and/or manage their disease(s);
- time spent educating them about their risk factors or disease(s) so they can learn what they can do to improve their own health; and
- help and information – if they need it – to help them get access to appropriate community care or home care.

This, in essence, describes good primary health care from the patient's perspective. It's about ensuring that patients receive the right care, at the right time, from the right health-care professional.

### What is primary health care renewal?

Renewing primary health care is about improving communication and co-ordination among different health-care providers and patients, so that everyone is working toward what is best for patients and their families.

There are a number of models being developed across Canada to improve primary health care. All of these models offer:

- more consistent, integrated and co-ordinated care for patients;
- more collegial, supportive and rewarding working life for doctors, nurses, and other health-care providers;
- more cost-effective care focused on preventing hospital admissions; and
- supporting patients so they can be more in control of their own health.

## Patient-centred care

From a patient's perspective, it makes sense to be able to access a wider range of health-care practitioners in a more convenient way. As well, the appropriate sharing of medical information among care providers helps to address a patient's health-care needs more effectively.

Improving the way primary health care is delivered helps ensure decisions are based on patient needs. Shared decision-making around how, where, and when services are provided and the type of services needed can lead to better health outcomes and greater satisfaction.

By actively participating in that decision-making process, patients can assume a greater share of responsibility for their own health.

## Working together, providing better care

Many people see their family doctor as their primary health-care provider, but there are in fact many other health professionals that play an important role in the provision of primary health care.

Overall, there are about 17 different health professions, ranging from physicians and nurses to dietitians and counselors, that make up the group of primary health-care professionals.

All of these health-care professionals provide important primary health care services, but currently many do not work together or co-ordinate their services effectively. A person may come into contact with several different health-care providers around a common health issue, but because each profession is working in relative isolation, treatment may not be provided in an integrated way.

Patient care and health outcomes can be improved when different primary health care providers work together as part of an interdisciplinary team, and when steps are taken to improve co-ordination among primary health-care providers, specialists, and hospitals.

## Improved access

People who have difficulty accessing a family doctor, like the frail elderly, the disabled, and those with chronic illnesses are often the most vulnerable in society. Some say this is the result of a general

shortage of family doctors in Canada. Others suggest it is related to an uneven distribution of doctors and the under-use of other health-care professionals such as nurses. The fact is that some areas have more than enough physician services while in other areas these services remain in short supply.

In British Columbia, the average doctor-to-patient ratio – the number of patients the average physician sees in his or her practice – is one to 1,440. However, in many communities, where there are fewer doctors practicing medicine, this ratio can be much higher, resulting in long waits or patients experiencing inadequate continuity in their care.

A renewed emphasis on primary health care aims to increase the range of services, expand patient choices, and provide more options for British Columbians. The intent is that it will also improve the working lives of family doctors, nurses, and other health-care professionals.

## Patient and provider satisfaction

Achieving greater patient satisfaction is a key goal in changing the way primary health care is provided. Patients who have greater options to access a wider range of health-care professionals generally experience greater satisfaction.

In many cases, health professionals working in practices that include a variety of health disciplines find greater satisfaction in their work, a better quality of work life, and improved health results for their patients.

## Flexibility in designing care delivery, and voluntary participation

For change to be successful, primary health care renewal must provide flexible and voluntary options for care providers and recognize that a “one-size-fits-all” approach will not effectively address patients' and health-care providers' needs.

We can learn from the successful models developed here in Canada and abroad, where different health professionals are working together to improve the quality of and access to primary health care. Early results indicate that patients are very satisfied with the new models of care, and physicians and other health-care providers on the team are more satisfied with their work.

## Providing a range of options

Recognizing that one-size does not fit all, British Columbia has chosen to support a variety of models of primary health care renewal. Different communities have different needs. And physicians, nurses and other health-care professionals who wish to participate in primary health care renewal can choose to practice in ways that best reflect their personal interests and needs.

Under the federal Primary Health Care Transition Fund, British Columbia is receiving \$74 million over four years (2002-2006). This amount is being shared among the province's six health authorities and the Ministry of Health Services. Some of the initiatives to renew primary health care include:

- establishing full-service, interdisciplinary practices or clinics (called Primary Health Care Organizations), where patient care is provided by, and co-ordinated among, a team of health professionals;
- health-care networks made up of family doctors in different locations. To improve patient care, doctors may co-ordinate after hours service with one another and share patient information through a confidential network;
- shared-care arrangements between family doctors and specialists. For example, a number of family practitioners with a high number of patients with mental health problems may work together with a psychiatrist, or mental health counselor to improve collaboration and ongoing patient treatment;
- augmented roles for nurses. In a number of practices in British Columbia, nurses provide a variety of services for patients such as immunizations, well-baby checks, follow-up for patients with chronic diseases, health counseling, and routine blood pressure monitoring;
- improved methods for managing the care of patients with chronic illnesses such as sharing health information among the health-care team, providing timely, consistent follow up, and involving patients more in self-care;
- development of information systems that enable different practitioners seeing the same patient to confidentially share medical information more

efficiently and quickly. Improved information can also help practitioners know what other services are available in their community, so they can refer patients to the service or provider best suited to meet the patient's needs; and

- 24-hour, seven-day-a-week access to health information available either by accessing the BC Health Guide ([www.bchealthguide.org](http://www.bchealthguide.org)) or by calling the BC Nurse Line (1-866-215-4700), where qualified nurses can answer questions about non-emergency, non-urgent health issues.

### How can I find out more about Primary Health Care Renewal?

- Talk to your family doctor, nurse, or other primary health-care professional.
- Contact your local health authority. Their web sites are a good place to start.
- Visit the Ministry of Health Planning web site at: [www.healthplanning.gov.bc.ca](http://www.healthplanning.gov.bc.ca).
- Visit the Health Canada web site at: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca).
- Organizations such as the BCMA and RNABC have information on their web sites.