

PRIMARY HEALTH CARE *

- Excerpted from the draft discussion paper, Advancing Primary Health Care in Alberta

Primary health care is a concept that has captured the interest and attention of policy makers, providers and communities around the world over the past twenty years since it was defined and endorsed by the World Health Organization. Recent efforts to reform the health system across Canada have resulted in a renewed focus on primary health care. While specific definitions of primary health care vary in the current literature, they have in common, key concepts, elements and terminology. One common element is that primary health care involves the first contact an individual has with the health system. Primary health care, while recognizing the importance and need for intervention and care components of health, is also consistent with a stronger emphasis on determinants of health and population health strategies, disease and injury prevention, health promotion, and the active involvement of communities and individuals, in partnership with providers, regarding decisions that affect their health.

A number of Regional Health Authorities, communities, practices and professional organisations have endorsed the concept of enhancing a primary health care approach. Alberta Health has contributed and participated in a number of conceptual forums where the importance of primary health care was discussed.

Primary health care is a key strategy in Alberta Health's current business plan. The goal is to encourage advancements in primary health care by facilitating the development and study of innovative models, approaches and delivery systems and to develop performance indicators for community health and primary health care.

Widespread support for primary health care has been developing. In A Renewed Vision for Canada's Health System, the Conference of Provincial/Territorial Ministers of Health identified a multidisciplinary approach to primary health care as a component of the future national health system. The findings of the federal National Forum on Health indicated that reform of primary health care is essential to create an integrated,

responsive and effective health system. Participants in a national consultation on primary health care said that they wanted to see continued dialogue on primary health care and emphasized the need for a vision, principles and standards to guide the development of primary health care. (What We Heard: A National Consultation on Primary Health Care, Health Canada, 1996)

Alberta Primary Health Care Stakeholder Consultation Process

In late 1997, Alberta Health contracted D'Andrea Consulting to conduct a stakeholder consultation process to gather information and viewpoints on where Alberta stands in regard to primary health care. As well, the consultation process was used to identify key components for consideration in future policy development and to inform the development of the Alberta Primary Health Care Project. The draft discussion paper, to be released early in 1999, found considerable agreement on a vision, principles and elements related to primary health care, as well as some aspects that are less agreed upon.

The vision, principles and elements identified and largely agreed upon through the stakeholder consultation process, are basic building blocks for future policy development.

The information from the stakeholder consultation process was invaluable in positioning the umbrella Alberta Primary Health Care Project and in the selection and funding 24 Alberta primary health care projects (both evaluation and demonstration projects) for funding. The purpose of the selected projects is:

- to gather evidence and learn over the course of 18-24 months about improvements in the ways that primary health care is delivered (e.g. approaches, models);
- to increase networking and links among providers; and
- to identify building blocks which will contribute to future primary health care policy development and a supportive environment for primary health care in the province.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM ALBERTA STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION PROCESS

The consultation focused on a series of questions derived from a review of the literature, including A Dialogue on Primary Health Care (Health Canada) and several background papers developed by different organizations exploring primary health care. The questions were sent out as a guide for extensive interviews with a variety of RHA management, professional associations and others involved in primary health care across the province.

DEFINITION OF PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

No agreed upon definition emerged from the stakeholder consultation process. There were many perspectives. It is clear from the literature review, however, that definitions are emerging and evolving in many jurisdictions. It is hoped that the Alberta Primary Health Care Project and its related 24 projects will generate evidence and learning that will aid the development of a definition that fits the Alberta and Canadian context.

VISION

Participants were asked to comment on a draft vision statement for primary health care.

“To provide coordinated and ready access to a full range of appropriate health services and support according to the needs, resources and decisions of the community as that community strives to achieve the goal of healthy Albertans living in a healthy Alberta.”

SHORT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The majority (75%) of respondents generally supported the ideas in the above-proposed vision. While there were specific suggestions for changes, many of those suggestions focused on how the vision would be interpreted or implemented.

PRINCIPLES

Participants were asked to review and comment on a set of principles, developed from major policy documents over the past five years. The following revised set of principles resulted from the consultation process:

- Encourages and facilitates individuals and communities to be as healthy as possible and recognizes the central importance of the determinants of health including social, cultural and economic factors (employment, housing, transportation, environment, education, etc.).
- Promotes and facilitates the participation of individuals and communities in taking greater responsibility for their own health.
- Focuses on the specific needs, strengths, resources and issues facing a community in deciding what services are to be offered, how many services are required, who will make up the team of providers, where and when services are to be offered.
- Delivers affordable, reliable and timely services accessible to community members according to their needs.
- Responds to priority health needs of the population, systematically identifies those at risk, and reduces inequities in health status.
- Uses multiple strategies to address individual and population health issues. This includes community development approaches and local intersectoral cooperation. It also involves an inter-disciplinary team approach including collaboration with volunteers and other agencies, and the use of non-traditional and alternative health workers as appropriate.
- Provides seamless transition and integrated care delivery through effective linkages between primary health care and secondary care.
- Uses appropriate and affordable technology and tools in conjunction with information systems management and linkages, continuous quality improvement, ongoing education, evaluation and research.

- Is accountable to community members, providers, RHAs and governments in the development of sustainable and affordable primary health care.
- Is implemented without major redesign of the health care system.

SHORT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A strong majority of respondents (80%) rated all of the principle statements as important or very important.

The principle statement addressing the use of multiple strategies, including intersectoral and interdisciplinary teams, was strongly supported by 90% of the respondents.

ELEMENTS

The following list of key elements¹ of primary health care were drafted to follow the principle statements and to provide a “checklist” of the critical features a primary health care organization should have in order to meet the vision and principles.

- Community involvement – uses appropriate resources for meaningful community involvement and develops the capacity of the community to address health issues
- Accessible – services are provided as close to the client as possible and community members can access the service and/or provider of choice easily
- Available – primary health care services are available based on the requirements of the community being served
- Comprehensive - a full range of services is provided with an emphasis on disease/injury prevention and health promotion. Clients are involved in discussion of broader health needs
- Integrated and coordinated - involves a wide range of multidisciplinary service providers, use of community staff, and coordinated services to avoid duplication and make the best use of available resources
- Approach to delivery – considers the broader determinants of health

- Appropriate technologies – cooperates to develop and use the most appropriate tools, techniques and information technology.
- Quality – helps local providers to deliver a high quality of service by rewarding continuous quality improvement and using evaluation research findings to develop the most effective services and linkages between service providers
- Accountable – addresses the needs of individual communities, adheres to provincial government policy, and contributes to ongoing improvement of services; the system answers the questions of accountability of whom, for what, and to whom
- Affordable – provides services within the limits of the community's resources
- Ongoing evaluation – uses information and ongoing evaluation to improve quality, delivery and outcomes

SHORT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

More than 80% identified the elements as important or very important.

“Accessibility” and “quality” were rated as the two most important elements of a primary health care system (97% and 98%, respectively).

Seventy-five percent of those responding rated “availability” as important or very important.

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