
Strengthening HOME AND COMMUNITY CARE

THE
CONTRIBUTION
OF THE
SCIENCE
AND PRACTICE
OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Introduction

Informally, home and community care have been basic to the health of Canadians for centuries. Long before the advent of the formal medicare system, Canadians were born, maintained their health, were cared for, and died at home or in a community facility.

The current reexamination of the Canadian medicare system includes home and community care. This sector is growing due to the impact of reduced health care funding, the reorganization of service delivery systems, more portable technology and an aging population. It is clear that the demand for home and community care will continue to increase in the coming years.

The Critical Issues

The challenges in the home and community care sectors are significant. A wider variety of illnesses and disabilities, as well as more severe and chronic conditions, must be responded to. The responsibility for care is primarily accepted by informal care givers such as family and friends and secondly by paraprofessionals, often with less training and infrastructure support than is found in acute care. Care is often delivered in homes amidst the ebb and flow of daily living.

The potential advantages of proper home and community care are well known. The goal is to provide high-quality care based on an accurate assessment of patient needs, a more psychologically positive environment for patients and family members, ready access to loved ones, a more normal life experience, the potential for reduced stress for consumers and care givers when adequate resources are made available, and more cost-effective service delivery. However, home and community care services are not without potential problems. These can include increased levels of patient isolation, inconsistent or inadequate levels of care (including the potential for injury and abuse), increased levels of burden on family members and care givers, unavailability of specialized services, information and support, the potential for high levels of stress and burn out and inadequate working conditions.

In many situations, home and community care are the optimal forms of health service delivery. In order to fully realize its potential, considerable care needs to be taken in conceptualizing and resourcing these services. Efforts to evaluate and reexamine the existing health system provide an excellent opportunity to determine current and anticipated home care needs. This process offers the possibility of building an integrated system of health services that allows for greater efficiency and responsiveness. Caution must be exercised in order to ensure that we do not move toward the increased use of home and community care with inadequate resources and design. This was done previously in the mental health field. Hospitals and residential facilities were closed with the promise of adequate funds for community services that never materialized. We must not repeat this grave breach of trust.



Psychology's Contribution

Consumers of home and community care services have multiple needs including medical, nursing, psychological and social. Psychological health services are an integral component of effective care. Such services address pain management, the emotional impact of illness and disability, psychological maladjustment, stress management, prevention of and rehabilitation from heart attack and stroke, cancer, neurological deterioration or injury, congenital conditions and so on. Specific examples include:

- Management of patients receiving home and community care due to psychological or behavioural problems or mental illness.
- Management of psychological complications secondary to another illness or condition.
- Optimizing recovery and rehabilitation by focusing on critical psychological factors.
- Developing integrated care plans that are appropriate to the developmental and functional needs of patients and their family members (from infancy to the elderly).
- Designing interventions and supports intended to prevent and address care giver and family stress and burn out. Families often experience significant changes in life style, such as increased social isolation, exhaustion, interpersonal difficulties, marital tensions and parenting problems as a direct result of the demands associated with caring for a family member.

In order to address these issues, patients and care providers need the option of accessing:

- Psychological assessments that will diagnose diseases and conditions and provide effective treatment options.
- Treatment support for informal and formal care givers providing the treatment determined by the psychological assessment.
- Direct treatment of patients by or under the supervision of a psychologist when required.
- Direct treatment of family members or the family system by or under the supervision of a psychologist when required.



- Consultation to informal and formal care givers regarding treatment implementation and changes in patient status.
- High quality information for all involved concerning relevant psychological issues and factors in adjustment and rehabilitation.
- Education for formal and informal care givers aimed at increasing their understanding of the nature and meaning of psychological factors within the context of illness and disability, understanding a family member's capabilities and establishing realistic expectations regarding outcomes, preventing potential burn-out, awareness of issues related to interpersonal safety and behaviour management and improving skills in conflict resolution.
- Ongoing consultation with formal care givers in a group setting to provide continuing education to build effective and supportive work teams and to delimit the serious effects of provider burn out and isolation.

Access

Most patients, care givers, and families in the home and community care sector are unable to access psychological services within the existing health service delivery systems. Presently there are three avenues of access; through public institutions and publicly funded services, through private insurance plans and on a fee-for-service basis. This has resulted in a two-tiered system for psychological health care.

The public system has always provided only limited access to psychological services. In addition, the availability and scope of services have not been equitable across jurisdictions, regions institutions or services. This difficulty has been exacerbated during the recent reorganization of the health system. In some regions, psychology services have been downsized or eliminated altogether resulting in a complete absence of service in some areas and longer waiting periods and higher patient/psychologist ratios in others.

The contraction of the public system has impeded the necessary introduction or expansion of psychological services in many institutions, centres and programs. Again this has led to Canadians being denied access to necessary services.

Private insurance policies are the vehicle used by many Canadians to access psychological services. Unfortunately, too many policies offer limited coverage, thereby restricting consumers access to effective services. Canadians are all too often left with one of two options; (1) to endure considerable suffering due to the inaccessibility of services or (2) pay for an increasing proportion of their psychological care.



Many Canadians do not have adequate resources to buy insurance or do not have coverage through their place of work. Only Canadians in upper income brackets realistically have the option of paying directly for psychological services.

These impediments to necessary psychological health care must be addressed in the development of comprehensive home and community care programs. It is well known that psychological factors are integral to the health and well being of Canadians. These factors play a significant role in health maintenance, early diagnosis, the design and implementation of effective treatment, recovery and rehabilitation, the management of chronic conditions and death with dignity. Psychological factors affect many diseases and conditions that span the life cycle.

Solutions

- **Effective and equitable home and community care systems need to address the psychological needs of consumers and their families. This goal would be best realized through a national collaboration resulting in a national home and community care program.**
- **Psychological services must be an integral part of any home and community care system, program or service.**
- **Psychologists in both the public and private sectors must be included in home and community care systems that are both integrated and interdisciplinary.**
- **Formal and informal care givers require access to current information related to the health condition of their patients and loved ones. Psychological knowledge is critical to effective health maintenance and health care and psychologists offer such services in an efficient and cost-effective manner.**
- **Community-based programs remain the most cost-effective and efficacious means of delivering many health services. Psychologists have the training and skills required to work in a coordinated manner with consumers, paraprofessionals and other health providers to enhance the effectiveness of such services.**
- **Effective and efficient home care systems must offer services that guard against formal and informal care giver strain and burn out. Psychologists are trained to diagnose and treat the signs of burn out.**

