
Strengthening MEDICARE

THE ROLE OF
PSYCHOLOGY
IN THE HEALTH
OF CANADIANS
AND IN THE
DEVELOPMENT
OF THE
CANADIAN
HEALTH
CARE
SYSTEM

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Association*

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Introduction

The Canadian health care system has seen major growth since the passage of the Medical Care Act in 1968. The original intention of medicare was to provide a publicly funded insurance system to cover physician and hospital services. However, with advances in health care research and the development of new health care disciplines, the scope of insurable services has expanded over time, predominantly in the areas of physician, institutional and physical health services. Hospitals were built, new medical services offered and nursing services expanded, while technological developments kept pace. The result is an excellent public medical/hospital system that is among the best in the world.

Despite this excellence, the system is limited. It is based on a model of physical illness and medical treatment which fails to capitalize on the crucial interrelationship between physical and psychological health. There is a well-established finding, consistently replicated in both the medical and psychological research literature, which documents that between 30% and 70% of a general practice physician's normal caseload consists of patients whose ailments are either of a psychological origin or are significantly related to psychological factors. There is a considerable body of evidence showing that when psychological services are available, the users of such services either utilize fewer or actually decrease their use of medical and hospital services. The relationship between psychological stress and impaired immune system functioning is unarguable. The Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation considers psychological stress to be one of the key determinants of cardiovascular illness. Very important to the economics of health care, decreases in total health care costs have been demonstrated following psychological interventions, even when the costs of such interventions are included. Despite this evidence, the central role of psychology is marginalized in the public health care system and seriously underfunded in the private insurance system.

The continuum of care in the new and emerging Canadian health care system must expand to incorporate psychology as a fully integrated partner. Psychological practitioners play a significant and cost-effective role in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of and adjustment to health problems and disease. To fail to incorporate psychology in no small way rejects the concept of integrated health services, access to a wide range of necessary health services, determinants of health and population health. Failure will severely limit the Canadian health care system of the next millennium and perpetuate the current two-tiered health system for psychological services, further ensuring that unemployed and less affluent Canadians receive fewer necessary services than the employed and more affluent. The result of inaction will be an unnecessarily overly expensive health system and an unacceptably high degree of human suffering.



Roles for Psychologists in the Emerging Health Care System

Psychologists play many roles in the health domain. Psychological research provides the basis for evidence-based practice. Psychological assessments are sophisticated, research-based and provide valuable data for the determination of differential diagnoses. Psychologists provide direct treatment to patients of all ages in health, mental health and rehabilitation facilities, in employee assistance programmes in business and industry, in schools, social service settings and the criminal justice system, settings in which psychologically based health issues have a significant impact.

Psychologists consult to formal and informal health care providers in the community on health issues to provide support and maximize treatment effectiveness. Programme evaluation and outcome research is increasingly important and psychologists are uniquely positioned to conduct, interpret and add value to these activities. The inclusion of human factors in the design of health care and health maintenance programmes, in the operation of health service administrative systems and in the development of public policy on health and health care is critical. Psychological research and practice in the areas of safe communities and in community development based on population health and the determinants of health frameworks make for a stronger and healthier society.

Current Reality of Psychology in Health and Health Care in Canada

The current situation for psychology in the Canadian health and health care system is both exciting and problematic. It is exciting in that psychological knowledge continues to grow rapidly, bringing new assessment and treatment techniques and technologies from the laboratory to patients and clients. Canadians highly value the services offered by psychologists as demonstrated not only by opinion polls and survey results but also by the strong demand for services in a highly competitive marketplace.

Despite this reality, access to psychological services is increasingly problematic. Although the Canada Health Act was amended in 1984 to allow provincial and territorial governments to cover psychological services under medicare plans, no jurisdiction has chosen to do so even though psychology is a regulated health profession in all ten provinces and the Northwest Territories. This occurs despite the fact that services delivered by optometrists, chiropractors, physiotherapists, and midwives are covered to some extent by medicare in some provinces. As a result, Canadians' access to psychological services is limited to three avenues.

First, psychological services are offered at some hospitals and clinics. However, psychology departments and psychology positions have been either drastically cut or eliminated completely during the current period of fiscally driven change. Waiting lists grow and staff are increasingly overworked. In addition, there are hospitals and clinics that have never offered psychological services to their



patients. The expansion needed to ensure the availability of psychological services in every hospital and clinic in Canada has been arrested.

Second, some Canadians can access psychological services through private insurance. However, the dollar amounts and the services funded through such insurance plans have never been adequate to cover the services required. This problem has been exacerbated in recent years with companies paring costs to ensure global competitiveness at the expense of employee benefits such as extended health coverage, even in the face of evidence which demonstrates that the inclusion of psychological services in benefit packages actually leads to cost savings.

Finally, Canadians can access psychological services by paying directly for them. This is a choice made by many affluent Canadians again reinforcing the fact that Canadians find these services very useful. The unemployed and less affluent cannot exercise this option thereby exacerbating what has always been a two-tiered health system for psychology in Canada. As the public system shrinks and the waiting lists grow, even fewer Canadians have access to psychological services and, sadly, those with the greatest needs have the least access.

Psychology Works: The Evidence

Psychological knowledge based on science has been developing exponentially since the Second World War. Psychological assessments and interventions are very effective in preventing, diagnosing and treating an increasing number of diseases and conditions from infancy to old age. Appropriate use of psychological services reduces human suffering and lowers health costs. Here are some examples:

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, alone or in combination with medication, is the treatment of choice for anxiety disorders and depression.
- Neuropsychological assessments are indispensable in delineating functional impairments in neurological diseases and brain trauma.
- Psychological interventions assist in the adjustment of patients, caregivers and significant others to chronic disease (i.e. diabetes), terminal illness (i.e. HIV) or diminished capacity (i.e. heart attack and stroke).
- Psychologists have developed assessment instruments regarded as standards in the assessment of psychopathy, dangerousness and paedophilia, thereby contributing to safer communities.



- All psychologists are educated as science-based practitioners and therefore are equipped to evaluate and interpret research and to conduct program evaluation and outcomes research.
- Early psychological interventions can alleviate human suffering and save down stream costs to the education, health, criminal justice and social welfare systems.
- Psychologists address behavioural issues across the lifespan from neonates to the elderly. Early interventions with children and families prevent later problems while programmes for the aged result in more independence and less suffering in the final decades of life.
- Psychology will continue to make important contributions to the understanding of the basic processes in the development and treatment of chronic illness and the development of the knowledge base for health promotion, disease prevention, and the understanding of basic brain behaviour relationships.
- Psychologists are in the forefront of providing stress and trauma “inoculation” programmes and post trauma services to those who endure traumatic events such as mine disasters, airline crashes, natural disasters, terrorism, ethnopolitical warfare or military service in high risk regions.

Solutions

Psychology has essential contributions to make to the health of Canadians yet its role is diminishing in the formal health care system. It is non-existent in the provincial/territorial health insurance programmes, marginalized in provincial/territorial health care budgets and underfunded in private insurance plans. Psychology must become a fully integrated partner in the Canadian health and health care system.

- To accomplish this each provincial/territorial government must establish a comprehensive psychology human resource plan to provide their citizens with adequate access to psychological services.
- The human resource plan can include a mix of insured services and salaried positions. The inclusion of health related psychological services as insured services in each of the provincial and territorial medicare programmes will go a long way to resolving the problems of access to psychological services.
- Salaried positions must be expanded and remuneration made competitive in order to attract and retain practitioners in our public institutions. The goal is for each public service delivery system to provide an adequate level of psychological services to their clients and patients.



- Salaried positions and geographically specific billing numbers can be used to ensure services in rural areas. For example, the Globe and Mail reported (7 May, 1998) that the only psychiatrist serving Thunder Bay Regional Hospital was departing and as a result the psychiatric ward was to close. There were 21 practicing psychologists located in the Thunder Bay area. There is no reason for situations such as this to occur if the services of psychologists are adequately integrated into the health care system.
- The inclusion of psychological services in any new programme such as pharmacare, home and community care and rural health must be a priority and must not be dependent on the inclusion of psychological services as insured services in provinces or territories.
- There are particular health problems and populations of health care users that do not respond well to conventional medical treatments and who are particularly costly to the health care system because of inappropriate or ineffective service utilization. Psychological intervention in these areas, e.g., chronic pain, anxiety disorders, depression, health risk habit disorders (smoking, obesity, sedentary life styles), and patients with serious chronic illnesses who are non-adherent to health care regimes, have been demonstrated as effective in improving health and in diminishing health care costs. Funding must be directed to psychological interventions for these and similar problems because they are demonstrably effective in terms of both improved health status and decreased health care costs.
- The private sector is an important component of the health system. Psychological problems in the workplace take an enormous toll on workers and productivity. It is essential to use psychological knowledge to improve conditions of work. Private insurance benefits packages and employee assistance programmes must be more realistic so as to reduce the obvious strain placed on Canadians due to inadequate coverage. These investments will be returned through healthier employees and increased productivity.
- The Federal Government is an important partner in funding the Canadian health system. Increased investment in research through the granting councils and increased funding of health in partnership with the provinces and territories is crucial. The Federal Government must ensure that any new national programmes, co-funded with the provinces and territories, contain a comprehensive basket of services which include psychology.

