
Strengthening PRIMARY CARE

THE
CONTRIBUTION
OF THE
SCIENCE
AND PRACTICE
OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Title: **Strengthening Primary Care: The Contribution of the Science and Practice of Psychology**

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Introduction

The World Health Organization defines health as “not merely an absence of disease but as a state of ***complete physical, mental and social well-being***.” This definition clearly points to the multi dimensionality of health, and includes biological, psychological, social, and cultural components.

- **An effective primary care delivery system must address each of these indicators of health.**
- **The prevention of ill health in children and adults depends on the application of psychological knowledge.**

Governments work diligently to address the factors that contribute to ill health. To date, the delivery of health care in Canada has revolved around primary care, that is, health care that is directly accessed by consumers through contact primarily with family physicians as well as psychologists and other health professionals.

- **Extensive research shows that expanding the base of primary care to more comprehensively include psychological care yields impressive benefits to individuals and society.**

Psychology Works: The HERO Study

For example, recent research conducted by the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) in Birmingham, Alabama, has shown that primary care patients receiving stress management interventions required fewer hospitalizations and emergency room visits. Conversely, the HERO study found that health care costs increased dramatically when stress and depression went untreated. The study included over 46,000 workers at several major U.S. companies. Results revealed that medical costs were 70% higher among individuals with untreated depression and 46% higher among individuals reporting uncontrolled and untreated stress. In fact, depression and stress were the primary predictors of total health care costs.

Similar research has shown that individuals with anxiety disorders make much greater use of primary care services compared to individuals free of anxiety. In fact, one study found that during a six-month period, the health care expenditures of individuals with anxiety disorders were 40% greater than those of individuals free of anxiety. Several studies have demonstrated that individuals with anxiety tend to seek help from the primary care system as opposed to the mental health care system.

- **Psychological factors are major sources of suffering for individuals and families which contribute to decreased productivity and increased health care costs.**
- **Anxiety disorders are associated with significant and inappropriate health care utilization, leading to as much as a 40% increase in health care utilization.**

Findings reported in *Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians* revealed that the vast majority of individuals who are depressed do not



The WHO Study

receive adequate treatment. Most depressed patients visiting primary care physicians do not openly present with psychological problems. In a recent study conducted by the World Health Organization, it was shown that 41% of depressed patients went to their family physician with physical complaints, 37% presented with pain and 12% presented with fatigue and sleep problems. Not surprisingly, depression often goes unrecognized and therefore untreated in primary care. This contributes to a high degree of human suffering, not to mention the economic costs associated with decreased productivity, lost work days and higher health care costs.

- **Stress and emotional difficulties are serious health issues in pediatric care.**

Psychology and Children

The situation is equally serious in pediatric primary care. Several epidemiological surveys have shown that 15 to 20% of children have a diagnosable psychological problem. Researchers estimate that approximately one-half of these children have significantly impaired functioning due to emotional distress, yet only 5% receive any form of psychological care and only 1 to 2% are treated by mental health specialists. Researchers have examined studies conducted in several countries that compared the prevalence of emotional problems among children and the ability of primary care pediatricians to identify these. Consistently, research shows that regardless of jurisdiction, primary care pediatricians identified 11 to 27% of known cases. In one study, over 80% of children with a known and diagnosable psychological disorder went undetected by primary care practitioners. The difficulties were even more pronounced when the children were preschoolers or from a visible minority.

- **Multi disciplinary teams are more successful in detecting and responding to psychological disorders of children.**

On a more promising note, one research group found that children who were assessed in multi disciplinary urban care settings were more likely to be referred to specialized mental health practitioners than children seen by private medical practitioners. In contrast, private practice primary care physicians were more likely to rely on offering reassurance and guidance.

Physical and Psychological Health

The distinction between physical and psychological health has become increasingly blurred. Lifestyle, mood, stress, and personality factors influence health status. Health influences psychological well-being and psychological factors influence health. Yet, the Canadian health care system continues to view these domains as separate. Canadian health care has moved in the direction of emphasizing highly technical medical interventions. Nurses and physicians continue to complain that they do not have adequate time to discuss issues with patients. There is a strong bias toward viewing illness as purely biologically-based, while ignoring the psychological health of the individual.



Canadians recognize that they need more than pharmacological interventions. Furthermore, consumers want to take a more active role in the management of their health. We imperil the individual and the health care system by ignoring psychological, behavioural and lifestyle issues. Current health care expenditures and the structure of the Canadian health care system contribute to the continued stigmatization of psychological well-being.

Psychological Factors in Health: The Evidence

- **Thyroid and adrenal disorders are generally associated with high rates of psychological symptoms.**
- **There is now a clear association between infection produced by the human immunodeficiency virus and psychological issues.**
- **Neuropsychology is critical to the effective management of disorders such as Alzheimer's, dementia, and those that result from closed head injuries.**
- **Certain types of cancer have been associated with an increased risk of psychological consequences, with estimates ranging from 11% to 50%.**
- **Cancer management is significantly enhanced by psychological interventions.**
- **Cancer chemotherapy is associated with considerable anticipatory anxiety, anticipatory nausea and other forms of psychological maladjustment.**
- **Psychological factors may predispose an individual to develop cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease and relate directly to effective rehabilitation and relapse prevention.**
- **Patients experiencing depression following a myocardial infarction have higher mortality rates than non depressed patients.**
- **In excess of 25% of patients with a medical condition fulfill diagnostic criteria for serious psychological maladjustment.**
- **Research shows that the risk of psychological disorders, suicide, and breakdown in marital functioning is considerable amongst individuals with chronic medical conditions. This is a critical finding given that the incidence of chronic medical conditions has increased as a function of medical advances, prolonged life-span and shifting demographics.**
- **Research has shown that in the management of chronic illness, failure to address all of the needs of the patient in a comprehensive manner, and to teach the patient and his or her family self-management skills, results in poorer outcomes.**



The Evidence Continues

- **Eight out of every ten Canadians will experience severe back pain at some point in their lives. Psychological treatments are effective for back pain and other forms of chronic pain.**
- **Smoking is a leading cause of death and health care spending. Psychologists have developed effective smoking cessation programmes that can contribute to improved health and decreases in health care spending.**
- **At least 10% of the adult population suffers from chronic insomnia and even more experience occasional sleep disturbances. Psychologists have developed empirically supported behaviour management strategies for the treatment and management of chronic and occasional insomnia.**
- **Developmental disorders and learning difficulties are addressed by psychological assessments and treatments.**
- **Psychological factors are critical in preventing disease and maintaining good health.**

The ancient Greek physician Galan was the first to note that 60% of visits to physicians were due to psychological factors. The same pattern is true today. In several studies a group of British researchers has found that many individuals consulting primary care physicians did so as a result of psychological problems. These findings suggest that many health care consumers are forced to make improper use of the services of family physicians.

Systemic Barriers to Access for Canadians

- **Family physicians are being sought out for services that are more appropriately provided by primary care psychologists.**

This points to a serious limitation in primary care. Specifically, our failure to create and implement a system of primary care that meets the needs of its consumers has led to improper use of current health care services. This results in economic and human resource inefficiencies and contributes to frustration and lack of satisfaction for consumers and health care providers alike. Considerable suffering has ensued for individuals and families whose needs for psychological assessment and or treatment have not been adequately met.

A recent Canadian study appearing in the *Canadian Family Physician* found that assigning primary care patients to psychological treatment resulted in a 49% reduction of visits to family physicians, and significant decreases in total health spending. Newman and Rozensky (1995) point out that “in our cost-conscious health care environment, psychological services, as part of comprehensive health care, have been shown to forestall or decrease the rise in overall medical service costs” (p. 4).



- **Research has shown that every \$1 spent on psychological services yields a savings of \$5 in medical costs.**

There is an important message in this finding. Offering the proper form of care results in decreased suffering, cost savings, and increased satisfaction for consumers and care-givers.

Limitations of the Current System

If consumers are aware of their need for psychological services, why have they not sought out these services on their own? Research has repeatedly demonstrated that after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors, the strongest predictor of health status is access to care. Individuals who are uninsured are less likely to have a regular source of care. This is the case with regard to psychological health care in Canada. Most Canadians do not have adequate access to psychological care because:

- (1) There are very few psychologists funded in the public health care system, and almost all of them are in tertiary care institutions.
- (2) Provincial medicare systems do not fund psychologists.
- (3) Many Canadians do not have private health insurance that covers care by a psychologist. Those that have extended health insurance often have inadequate coverage.

Proposed Solutions

- **Canadians need access to quality psychological health care.**
- **The economic viability of the Canadian health care system is dependent on a restructuring that recognizes the need to integrate physical and psychological health through viable interdisciplinary delivery models**
- **Interdisciplinary community-based primary care remains the most cost effective and efficacious means of delivering health care services.**
- **Psychologists have the training and skills required to work in a coordinated manner within a primary care team. They offer assessment, consultation, treatment and program evaluation services.**

