

The Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada made recommendations on sustaining a publicly funded health system that balances investments in prevention and health maintenance with those directed to care and treatment. On November 28, 2002 the Commission delivered its Final Report to Canadians. Below is the submission made to the Commission by APNS.

### Adequate Care for Psychological Health

An effective health care system must be built upon a broadly conceived definition of health. The traditional model of health care focuses on disease as opposed to health. As such, health care tends to be reactive and not proactive. Health promotion and the prevention of disease have not been central to the delivery of health care in Canada. At the heart of a broad definition of health is human behavior. Human behavior reflects all of the activities that Canadians engage in with respect to daily living, lifestyle and self care including both physical and mental/psychological domains. To dichotomize physical and mental health misrepresents the interconnected reality of human physiological functioning. Canada's health care system must not perpetuate this false dichotomy. Human behavior impacts upon physical health. Individuals maintain responsibility for taking care of the health of their bodies, physically and mentally. In recognition of this, there must be a focus within healthcare that appropriately delivers services across this broad continuum. If we are to adequately care for the physical health of Canadians, we must provide adequate care for psychological health. At present the lack of parity between physical and psychological health care is simply discriminatory.

### “... psychologists are behavioral change experts.”

The failure to provide adequate psychological health care impacts our broader communities in dramatic ways. An Alberta study on school violence found that among students identified as violent, 20% suffered from depression, 18% from anxiety disorders, 50% had attention difficulties and over 10% had signs of thought disorder. Over 60% of general practice physician visits are for concerns that can be attributed to

psychosocial problems that present through physical complaints. Stress, anxiety and depression are among the 6 most common conditions seen by family practice physicians. Sixty percent of all employee absences are due to psychological problems. The lifetime prevalence of depressive disorders is nearly 17%. The annual economic burden to the Canadian workplace from depression alone is estimated at \$6 billion in diminished productivity and absenteeism. Addressing the full spectrum of health care needs makes for greater individual quality of life and for healthier communities

### The Role of the Psychologist

Psychology is the study of human behavior and psychologists are behavioral change experts. Whether helping children overcome specific phobias, assessing the loss of cognitive function after a head injury, identifying factors and strategies that enhance a diabetic's insulin self management, or helping someone to overcome an eating disorder, psychologists provide primary care for all of these conditions and more. The specialty of Health Psychology represents the largest growth area within psychology. Behavioral interventions help individuals to change habits to reduce risks for cardiovascular disease, cancer and HIV. Psychological behavioral techniques and biofeedback help people control high blood pressure and manage chronic pain and headaches. The relevance of psychological factors to physical health is the *raison d'être* for this specialty. However, the ability to directly access the services of a psychologist is limited to a few Canadians. The numbers of salaried psychologists in public health care settings are diminishing due to downsizing. Most private psychological services are accessible only to the limited few that have some private health insurance.

Appropriate psychological health care is simply not available to the majority of Canadians. The reorganized Canadian health care system must provide services that are evidence based. Effective treatments that have been empirically validated through research offer the optimal utilization of the health care dollar. Best practice models exist within most areas of health care. The outcomes of service delivery to patients must be evaluated to insure their efficacy and their compliance with best practice models. Psychologists provide evidence-based services and routinely evaluate the efficacy of such services to demonstrate that they work. Psychologists have identified empirically validated approaches to the treatment of a variety of disorders including depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. Psychologists also study patient adherence to treatment. The most appropriate and expensive medical interventions might only prove efficacious if the patient actually adheres to the treatment protocol.

**“The task before us is to draw upon the ingenuity of all Canadians to ensure ... that our health system meets the challenges of the 21st century.”**

~ Roy Romanow, in accepting head of commission

Psychologists have led the field in identifying strategies that optimize patient adherence variables. The health care cost offset phenomenon represents those costs that are saved through the provision of more direct, appropriate, and less expensive services. Connecting consumers with the right service provider at the right time to best meet their needs saves money.

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Not only do psychological treatments save health care dollars, failing to provide such treatments results in far greater costs in terms of health deterioration and community impacts. The cost of providing more intensive health care (e.g., hospital admission) is much more substantial than early onset outpatient treatments. Further, decreased productivity in the work force is very costly. Medication costs represents 15% of all health care expenditures and are often beyond the budgets of many Canadians without a drug plan. More direct behavioral interventions, such as those offered by psychologists, may be more effective and ultimately less costly.

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### **Cost-effectiveness of Psychological Services**

The following examples reflect the savings accrued from the provision of appropriate psychological services to relevant populations. Pre-surgical psychological counseling is associated with fewer complications and a reduction in medication utilization. The provision of psychological services in an Ontario community health clinic reduced the number of physician visits by 49%. Breast cancer patients who participate in group psychotherapy are known to survive longer than those who do not. Elderly patients who receive mental health care spend on average fewer hospital days per year than those hospitalized for the same reasons but who did not receive mental health care. Smoking contributes to one of the highest causes of death and health care spending. Psychologists have developed effective smoking cessation projects that contribute to improved health and decreases in health care spending. Outpatient treatment, which most psychologists provide, is more cost-effective, less restrictive and provides greater accessibility, especially for patients in rural areas. In general, every \$1

spent on psychological services yields a savings of \$5 in medical costs. Psychological health care works and saves money. Relegating psychological health to a secondary level of import compromises the overall health of Canadians and reinforces unhealthy and stigmatized notions about mental health. Nearly 1 in 4 adults suffer from a psychological disorder in their lifetime yet less than 30% of those will seek help. Greater support for behavioral and emotional disorders should decrease some of the associated stigma with respect to such disorders and decrease reluctance of some in accessing appropriate mental health care. Helping Canadians to take better care of their psychological health makes for a healthy population and for a healthy Canada.

Psychologists are uniquely qualified to provide a wide spectrum of health care. This care includes comprehensive assessment, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and prevention for a variety of health-related and mental health problems. Psychologists require a high degree of education and training. Most psychologists have a doctoral degree in psychology with supervised practice and internship experiences. Registration is required for the independent practice of psychology in all Canadian jurisdictions.

Many of the health problems facing Nova Scotians can be improved through appropriate psychological care. Nova Scotia has the highest rates of death from cancer in general and breast cancer in Canada. Nova Scotia has the highest rate of diabetes in Canada. Nova Scotia has the second highest percentage of smokers in Canada. Nova Scotia has the second highest rate of deaths from lung cancer. Nova Scotia has the second highest percentage of heavy drinkers in Canada. Nova Scotia has the third lowest percentage of regular exercisers in the country. Nova Scotia has the third highest percentage of overweight adults in the country. Improvements made to the health care system should particularly enhance the health of Canadians from less advantaged regions.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Access to appropriate psychological care must be available for all Canadians.
2. Consumers must have the choice to access appropriate care. Allowing individuals the right to choose the health care provider most relevant and appropriate for them should be advocated.
3. Health care services must be evidence based and empirically validated.
4. Only treatments provided by health care practitioners who are regulated provincially should be publicly funded.
5. The majority of Canadians presenting to family practice physicians with psychological needs require a new route by which to access psychological health services. It is recommended that partnerships between medical practitioners and psychologists can more appropriately respond to many of these patient complaints. Involving psychologists more directly in this capacity allows family practice physicians more time to also do what they do best, providing physical care. Perhaps the “shortage” of family physicians would be less of an issue if their available hours for physical care were increased in this way. Creative funding mechanisms will be necessary to allow for the participation of psychologists in these partnerships.
6. Health care services delivered outside the public system are increasing in scope and in frequency and should be integrated within the broader health care system. Greater partnerships between public and private sectors of the health care community will more equitably provide services for all citizens and will diminish the growing two-tiered system of health care in Canada.