

THE PSYCHOLOGISTS' ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA RESPONSE TO THE EXPERT ADVISORY PANEL TO REVIEW PUBLICLY FUNDED HEALTH SERVICES IN ALBERTA

Psychologists and Their Services

Psychologists are highly trained members of a regulated profession under the Psychology Professions Act. In Alberta, psychologists must have a minimum of a master's degree (6 years of university training), must complete 1600 hours of supervised practice, pass the Examination for Professional Practice In Psychology (a professional qualification examination used across North America), and pass an oral examination. Psychology is a strictly regulated profession, with Alberta psychologists following the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists and the Alberta Code of Conduct. In Alberta, the College of Alberta Psychologists exists to protect the public and regulate the profession.

Psychologists are well trained and uniquely qualified professionals who perform the following functions:

- Conducting psychotherapy for individuals, couples, families and groups; counselling in areas that have been traditionally defined as mental health, mental illness and addictions, as well as marital, family and parental functioning.
- Providing insight into normal and abnormal human development across the life cycle from infancy to old age.
- Conducting the assessment of individuals and families in a variety of settings: mental health, forensic, custody and access during separation and divorce, child protection, psycho educational, and organizational assessments.
- Conducting research to examine the biological bases of behaviour with an interest in such fundamental processes as cognition, memory and perception. Clinical neuropsychological assessments are critical to the diagnosis, treatment and management of closed head injuries, dementia, Alzheimer's, and the cognitive/behavioral effects of other neurological disease.

- Treating the psychological aspects associated with medical conditions including respiratory disorders, addictions (cigarettes, alcohol, drugs), impulse control disorders (sexual disorders, gambling), diabetes, acute and chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, high risk pregnancy, sleep disorders, eating disorders, mood disorders, failure to thrive, etc.;
- Participating in rehabilitation programming with patients and related disciplines to maximize recovery, rehabilitation, relapse prevention and adjustment associated with the onset of a sudden or chronic disability;
- Consulting with organizations, agencies and government regarding mental health enhancement, treatment and mental illness prevention;
- Providing education, training and supervision of psychologists and related mental health service providers.
- Industrial/Organizational psychologists assist health organizations to develop efficient systems aimed at maximizing quality, maximizing employee health and productivity, and meeting service demands.
- School psychologists work with children, adolescents, families and schools to address learning, cognitive, affective and behavioural problems and to identify and assist students with special needs, ranging from those with limitations to those who are gifted.
- Forensic psychologists provide psychological expertise to the legal system (e.g., family, civil, criminal) and work within the federal, provincial, and territorial criminal justice systems.
- Social and community psychologists work with community leaders to apply psychological knowledge in the development of productive, healthy, and safe communities.

Benefits

It is clear that psychology makes varied and important contributions across the broad spectrum of health and health care; in health promotion, disease and injury prevention, diagnosis and treatment, relapse prevention and rehabilitation, chronic disease management, and palliative care.

Health promotion and disease prevention are essential components of an effective health care system. Lives are enhanced and costs contained whenever illness and injury can be prevented rather than treated. Health promotion and disease prevention require educating and influencing the behaviour of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities.

Psychologists help people to change their attitudes and behaviors. Programs which promote smoking cessation, stress and anger management, parenting and caregiver skills, and management of chronic disease, to name only a few, positively impact upon the physical and psychological health of Canadians. The human and financial costs of chronic disease (e.g., diabetes, heart disease), the illnesses that can result from lifestyle choices (e.g., smoking and cancer), and the conditions which can result from a lack of knowledge, resources, and/or support (e.g., stress, depression) are exacerbated when psychological factors are not addressed.

Diagnosis is the first step in health care. Research shows that between 30 and 60 per cent of concerns dealt with by primary care physicians are a direct result of, or are significantly influenced by, psychological factors. The development and delivery of effective and efficient treatment depends upon accurate diagnosis of the psychological components of illness and injury.

Psychological factors are central to the health and health problems of Canadians and, consequently, must be acknowledged and addressed by the professionals in our society best able to assess and treat them. Psychologists are the professionals best trained to assess and treat psychological factors. Psychologists are essential primary care partners. Early intervention is the key to reducing suffering and downstream costs.

Rehabilitation is often required after serious illness or injury. Psychological factors play a pivotal role in facilitating recovery, rehabilitation, and relapse prevention. The cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of recovery include the patients and their families, friends and colleagues. Health care utilization following serious illness or injury can be reduced and minimized if a patient receives the appropriate psychological intervention to help the patient recover from or effectively and responsibly manage the illness/injury.

Chronic disease and disability (e.g., diabetes, significant developmental delay, spinal cord injuries, fibromyalgia) include profound psychosocial factors in addition to the physical factors. By definition, chronic disease and disability do not go away and people with disability face the challenge of responding to their disabilities every day of their lives. Psychologists help people maintain treatment regimens (e.g., neglect of self-care is often an expression of depression), cope with changes in capacity, manage pain, and enhance quality of life. As is the case for illness and injury, chronic disease and disability affects not only the identified “patient” but also family, friends, and colleagues who often need assistance in coping with the consequences of disease and disability.

As the population ages and people live longer, more people are living with age-related diseases like dementia and cancer. The coincident need for palliative care is increasing. Elderly people face the increased probability of depression, which negatively affects their ability to cope with other health issues. The role of psychological factors and the need for psychological support when people and their loved ones face age-related and end-of-life issues is significant.

Alberta Chartered Psychologists are well positioned to play an important role in providing health care for Albertans. No other mental health profession requires as high a degree of education and training in mental health as psychology. Accredited programs in clinical psychology, including practicum and internships, involve several years of training beyond an undergraduate degree. Psychologists' training compliments psychiatrists' training to form a comprehensive mental health partnership.

Research

There is clear and compelling evidence that psychological interventions are effective in treating a wide range of adult and child health problems. These include depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, substance abuse, impulse control disorders, and chronic pain. There is also evidence that there are effective psychological treatments for Type I diabetes, chronic headaches, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic low-back pain, chronic fatigue syndrome, and a range of medically unexplained physical health symptoms. Psychological services, both preventative and therapeutic, are known to be effective in treating cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal diseases.

Research has also indicated benefits from psychological interventions by preventing the physical stress and anxiety effects on the body escalating to the point where medical treatment becomes necessary. It is estimated that between 30 and 60 per cent of visits to primary care physicians are for medical complaints that stem from psychological factors, especially stress related factors.

Service Volume and Cost

Psychologists are able to provide services throughout Alberta. The Psychologists' Association of Alberta presents a fee schedule based on the cost of private practice and the qualifications and training needed to be a psychologist. Presently the recommended rate is \$135 per hour for basic services. The rate for specialized services varies. Many psychologists offer a sliding scale and do pro bono work. Psychologists also work in hospitals, mental health clinics, agencies, schools, industry, and prisons.

Vision of Funding Services Provided by Psychologists

Psychologists are well positioned to provide services to all Albertans through a variety of methods of funding, including increased public funding. Within the spectrum of health services, psychological services are critical. A patient's ability to access psychological services will reduce the visits to family physicians for psychological/mental health reasons. While some Albertans have access to psychological services through employee assistance programs, social services, mental health clinics, hospitals, and private funding, many cannot obtain services. A creative and flexible form of public funding would meet

the needs of these individuals and also increase the access of other Albertans with limited financial means.

Many physicians now provide psychotherapy to patients and would prefer to refer to psychologists if the funding was available. This is especially true for children. A viable option would be to include psychologists on the list of health professionals able to provide psychotherapy. This would enable physicians and psychologists to provide Albertans with the optimum opportunity to provide services in the area of their expertise.

Categories of psychological services publicly funded would include all clinical services. Clinical services are psychological services directly related to health. This includes: psychotherapy and counseling individuals, families, and groups; neurological assessments, including closed head injury, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease; and with the referral of the treating physician, psychological treatment of illness and medical conditions including: respiratory disorders, smoking addiction, acute and chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, cancer, sleep disorders; rehabilitation to maximize recovery and minimize relapse, and adjustment to a disability.

Services that would not be publicly funded are forensic assessments, industrial/organizational psychological services, and school assessments. Private sources or other government departments appropriately fund these services.

Psychologists agree that a means test would be appropriate to assist lower income families with access to psychological services. This has been effective in other government initiatives such as the Department of Justice mediation program.

Various services may be funded at different rates and must reflect the training and expertise of the psychologist providing the service.

Summary

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta is available for a discussion of options and alternatives to assist the government in providing quality health services to Albertans. We believe that redirection of funds to psychological services will be cost effective and will offset the costs of other services as well as contribute to the quality of health of Albertans.

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