

Position Paper Regarding the Future of Mental Health Services in Alberta

The Psychologists Association of Alberta supports the ten principles as laid out in the Alberta Provincial Mental Health Planning guidelines. In addition we support the guiding philosophy of the Canada Health Act with respect to mental health services in Alberta; “...to protect, promote and restore the physical and mental well-being of residents of Canada and to facilitate reasonable access to health services without financial or other barriers.” In this context we believe that four principles in particular should guide mental health services.

Access: It is crucial that all Albertans have equal access to mental health services. The provision of mental health care should be, to the greatest extent possible, available to all Albertans such that lack of availability and financial barriers do not preclude access to needed services. Services should be available in a timely fashion so that early intervention militates against unnecessary exacerbation of illness and suffering and the possible slide into chronicity. Access to mental health services should constitute as open a process as is possible for the consumer. To this end the referral process should be as simple and effective as possible. For example, the current system requiring referral through medical practitioners for some services consumes valuable time and resources that could be more effectively utilised in direct service provision. Finally, mental health service accessibility should not be hampered by cultural or linguistic barriers. They should be effective for, and inclusive of, all segments of Alberta society taking account of the multicultural reality of Alberta’s growing and diverse population.

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 offer some form of coverage for psychological services through Alberta Health. This would enable physicians and psychologists to provide Albertans with the optimum services in the area of their expertise.

Comprehensiveness: It is crucial that all Albertans have equal access to a full range of services. A comprehensive mental health delivery system should incorporate services of multidisciplinary teams of qualified professionals. Since mental health issues do not arise in an individual or family irrespective of their context, comprehensive services should address all facets of the person’s milieu. Components of comprehensive services should include (but not necessarily be limited to) medical, psychiatric, social and psychological, and, where appropriate, spiritual care. These services should include institutional, private and community based services.

Quality: It is crucial that Albertans have full and timely access to a comprehensive range of mental health services provided by qualified and competent professional care providers. By virtue of their training and licensure, professional mental health workers subscribe to accepted levels of qualification, ethical practice and ongoing professional development that ensure that clients receive the most appropriate, effective and efficient services. This ensures that mental health services are delivered in a way that optimises benefit to clients and promotes greatest cost effectiveness to the health care system and society as a whole.

Proactive: It is crucial that Albertans have full and timely access to a comprehensive range of mental health services provided by qualified and professional care providers with a focus on prevention of illness and promotion of mental and physical health. The current wisdom in all health professions is that it is easier and more cost effective to prevent problems than to ameliorate them after they occur. To this end, medical (including physicians, nurses and other allied medical professions), psychologists, social workers, spiritual care workers are increasingly moving toward a model of care that pre-empt the development of pathogenic conditions in their clients and society at large. While it is critical to provide services to address services for acute and chronic care, increasing our focus on preventative measures will ultimately reduce our reliance on already overburdened secondary (acute) and tertiary (chronic) care capacities.

In summary, it is our belief that psychologists have an important and integral role to play in the delivery of mental health services in Alberta. We possess knowledge and skills to facilitate the delivery of accessible, comprehensive, quality mental health services and to promote healthy lifestyles to achieve the proactive component of the proposed model. In particular, we believe that psychologists have a significant role in encouraging people to stay healthy, and in motivating and teaching all Albertans ways to enhance their future health. We believe that all Albertans would benefit from having access to a full range of health services, including psychological services. Unlike approaches that offer only symptomatic relief, psychological interventions offer a chance to get to the root cause of mental health problems. We believe that it is vitally important to provide the right care, by the right professional, at the right time. Psychologists are well positioned to provide leadership in the roles of healthy lifestyle education, promoting healthy, responsible behaviour, and providing the therapy and counseling to contribute to healthy recovery from physical and mental illness.