

Response to the Report of the Premier's Advisory Council of Health,  
A Framework for Reform

March 2002

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Report of the Premier's Advisory Council on Health, A Framework for Reform, December 2001, Chair Right Hon. Don Mazankowski, P.C., O.C. The PAA believes that Alberta psychologists, along with all Albertans have an opportunity to lead the country in health reform. Psychologists are pleased to provide their unique perspective and experience with a view to developing a sustainable and quality health care system. 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 health future. We believe that all Albertans would benefit from having access to a full range of health services, including psychological services. We believe that it is vitally important to provide the right care, by the right professional, at the right time. The PAA is well positioned to provide leadership in the roles of healthy lifestyle education, promoting healthy decision-making behavior, and providing the therapy and counseling treatment to contribute to healthy recovery from physical and mental illness. The PAA is prepared to try new ideas, to encourage responsible choice for Albertans, and supports the goals of evaluation and accountability.

This document will comment on each of the ten recommendations for reform outlined in the report with a focus on the potential for inclusion of psychological services to support a sustainable health system for Albertans. Attached are documents that provide information about the unique training and qualifications that are required to be a Chartered Psychologist in Alberta, the services provided by psychologists that relate to various aspects of health care, and information about the Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA). We believe expanded use of the services psychologists offer will be cost effective, facilitate more choice for some services, and assist in achieving the goal of optimum health and wellness for Albertans.

Recommendation #1

The first recommended reform is to encourage and assist Albertans to stay healthy. Psychologists have the expertise and tools to assist other health care professionals to educate and motivate Albertans to make healthier lifestyle choices. Psychologists have

the teaching skills, the understanding of human behavior and motivational needs, and the ability to provide information relevant to various health care professionals. Psychologists are able to address the needs of individuals that often do not respond to, and drop out of, the educational opportunities provided for Albertans. Psychologists have the training to work with children in poverty so they are more likely to continue with their education as well as make better lifestyle choices.

Psychologists are trained to research the psychological factors and environmental aspects of lifestyle choices. We value the opportunity to work with other health professionals to develop and evaluate Albertans' life style choices. Many Albertans need direct mental health services that are best provided by a psychologist as part of a team of health professionals. For example, the occurrence of depression and suicide are extremely high in Alberta. There are real costs associated with these illnesses and these illnesses can be treated and prevented. Depression is often related to life style choices and research has shown that a combined approach of therapy by a qualified psychologist, and medical attention from a family physician and/or psychiatrist is most effective.

The PAA supports working with industry and business organizations to enhance mental health, safety, and work environments that promote health in the workplace. The PAA has approved a Healthy Workplace Award to be presented for the first time this year. This award will be given to a workplace setting that promotes and facilitates a healthy place for work both psychologically and physically. Early intervention minimizes the costs related to lost productivity due to reduced performance, mistakes, and absenteeism. Many psychologists work in industrial settings providing a variety of services. Employers now recognize the benefits of providing psychological therapy for employees who have personal, family, and/or social problems including stress, depression, and addiction. A psychologically healthy work environment that promotes employee wellness has been proven to be cost effective.

### Recommendation #2

The second recommended reform, to put "customers" first, is also supported by the PAA. Albertans need more choice in health care. This includes access to psychological services for all Albertans. Psychological services must be a part of new models of health care for Albertans. The report acknowledged the problem that many Albertans now have in accessing a family physician and a specialist such as a psychiatrist. This is especially true for rural Albertans. Psychologists are well positioned to provide timely services to assist with this need.

It is understood that other provinces are considering de-listing physicians from providing psychotherapy. This reflects the fact that general medical education does not provide enough of the required knowledge and skills to provide the expertise needed for psychotherapy. The PAA supports this initiative. Psychotherapy can, and should be, provided by psychologists who are specially trained and licensed in this area. A cooperative approach by physicians and psychologists can address the need for

psychotherapy and psychological counseling for Albertans on a timely basis. This type of collaborative initiative has the potential to be one of the new ideas that will provide the right health professional, at the right time, to provide the right service to Albertans. The PAA is ready to work collaboratively with the government to explore a number of possible alternative ways to finance this initiative.

### Recommendation #3

The third recommended reform is to redefine what we mean by “comprehensive”. The PAA supports the concept of services (including psychological services) paid by individuals, supplementary insurance, and/or through subsidy programs to ensure access by Albertans with limited resources. De-listing psychotherapy as a service provided by physicians would provide the opportunity for this service to be provided by psychologists through government funding under certain circumstances. It is understood from family physicians that they would prefer to refer patients to a chartered psychologist if the patient could afford this health service. A cooperative program that includes individual responsibility, supplementary insurance, employee assistance programs, and a subsidized government plan for low income Albertans, would be cost effective, provide choice, and enable Albertans with limited resources to access needed psychological services.

The report also refers to a permanent expert panel to review publicly funded health services and treatments. Psychologists have much to contribute to this panel and the PAA would be pleased to assist in providing appropriate names for consideration. The psychological view of health services and treatments must be heard when making health care decisions for Albertans.

### Recommendation #4

The fourth recommended reform is to invest in technology and to establish an electronic health record. The PAA supports this within the guidelines of confidentiality that protect the rights of the patient. Pertinent mental health information is seen as a vital component of comprehensive health care as problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression have strong physical components that need to be considered by all health professionals working with a patient. Professional guidelines for psychologists and other health professionals must be considered when establishing health record systems.

### Recommendation #5

The fifth recommended reform is to re-configure the health system and encourage more choice, more competition, and more accountability. The PAA supports opening up service agreements to include various health professionals, private, not for profit, and government health providers. This will also facilitate cooperation among health professionals. Services must be accessible to all Albertans, including children and those Albertans residing in rural areas. The PAA views the integration of mental health

services with other health services as a positive initiative. This would encourage health care providers to work as groups and provide services throughout Alberta. Many psychologists work in both urban and rural areas and can provide services to all Albertans. The effective utilization of psychological services will contain costs and will be more efficient. While psychologists provide psychological therapy and related services such as psychological assessment, family physicians will be more available to provide medical services to Albertans. Psychologists also have the training to provide therapy and services for groups of people, which will be more cost efficient. A cooperative approach to address the needs of children, especially the identified group of younger children, with the ministries of Health and Wellness, Children's Services, Learning, and Justice would be more effective.

This "made in Alberta" approach has the potential to not only enhance the health and health care of Albertans, but also to provide an example for other provinces. The PAA takes an active role in meeting with psychologists across Canada to discuss ways to improve all aspects of the provision of psychological services.

Psychologists believe that we have much to contribute to primary health care as psychological well being directly impacts our physical and emotional health and our response to illness. It is critical that this aspect of primary care be included in health care for Albertans. Psychological intervention has the potential to reduce hospital stay time, perception of and ability to cope with pain, recurrence of illnesses such as heart related problems and cancer, and recovery. As the population ages, the importance of psychological interventions to address the common occurrence of depression, and the negative impact it has on health for seniors and health care costs, will rise significantly. A health team that includes psychologists has the best potential to improve outcomes.

The PAA concurs with the need for leadership and public education regarding mental health. This is even more important with the growing trends of stress and depression in our changing world. The education and qualifications of psychologists must be emphasized in the mental health area. As indicated in the attached information, psychologists have at least six years of university education (minimum licensing requirement is a Master's degree) and sixteen hundred hours of supervised experience plus many more hours in clinical training and supervised practice. All chartered psychologists must pass both a written and oral exam and follow the ethics and guidelines for practice established by the Canadian Psychological Association and the College of Alberta Psychologists. Many psychologists have eight to ten years of university education and have a doctorate degree. These unique qualifications must be recognized in the mental health area.

The increasing numbers of seniors in the coming years has the potential to place a heavy burden on our young adults in the future. Now is the time to develop cost effective services that will enhance the health of older Albertans and provide for more productive and independent senior years. Psychologists are able to provide lifestyle education and motivation to change, as well as to mitigate the tendency towards

depression associated with aging. This will significantly reduce costs to the health care system.

Children and adolescents need better access to mental health services. This must be a coordinated effort among professionals in the health system, social services, schools, and criminal justice system. Psychologists provide essential services in all of these areas. There is an ongoing shortage of professionals to work with children and adolescents, resulting in delays for service. Delays can be addressed by using psychological expertise within a team approach to meet these needs. This is most urgent as children are the future of Alberta.

### Recommendation #6

The sixth recommended reform is to diversify the revenue stream. Instead of rationing health services, we must find alternative ways of paying for the health services Albertans want and need. The PAA supports government funding of the majority of health care costs and developing creative ways of providing for the services of related health professionals, especially psychological services. It is necessary for the future health and wellness of Albertans that psychological services are more accessible. That being said, it would be in the public interest for the social support system to provide some form of subsidized access to psychological services for low income Albertans. Without such an approach, low-income citizens may continue to be a financial burden on the system by continuing to draw on other more expensive medical resources that could have been minimized with early psychological intervention.

All Albertans deserve the opportunity to improve their lifestyle choices, address emotional and social problems, and obtain assistance in coping with illness by accessing psychological services. By accessing other sources of revenue, both public, private, and not for profit access to psychological services can be improved while containing costs and being more efficient. Psychological services have the potential to reduce the need for other health care and social services provided by the government. Providing psychological services has the potential to assist in sustaining health care through more appropriate use of the system.

The majority of low-income Albertans do not have access to services provided by psychologists. The government has the opportunity to provide more access to low income Albertans through a subsidy program such as the one provided for mediation in separation and divorce. Blue Cross presently offers some supplementary health benefits to seniors and other individuals but psychological services must be included as an essential service for Albertans. The PAA is open to discussing viable options to increase the access of Albertans to psychological services. We concur with the guiding principles of access for all Albertans, coverage for catastrophic illness and injuries, protection for Albertans with low incomes, and incentives to be and stay healthy. The PAA also supports innovation, exploring different sources of revenue, and developing new approaches to funding.

### Recommendation #7

The seventh recommended reform is to put better incentives in place for attracting, retaining, and making the best use of health providers. The PAA supports this reform. The provision of better access to psychological services may also provide an incentive for physicians to stay in Alberta as it has the potential to reduce some of the pressure felt by family physicians and psychiatrists to provide psychotherapy and other counseling services. Providing medical professionals with the option to refer patients to a chartered psychologist, regardless of their financial situation or location, could have a positive impact on the system.

Psychologists also support the concept of a clinic of health professionals providing a wide range of services. A “made in Alberta” approach would be of great benefit to Albertans if these services could be provided in an accessible place without delays with financial compensation for all professionals coming from the single administration of the clinic. This provision for quality care should enhance each professional’s desire to remain in a province that supports and provides for such excellence.

### Recommendation #8

The eighth recommended reform is to make quality the top priority for Alberta’s health care system and to set standards, measure results, and hold people accountable for achieving better outcomes in health. The PAA supports research, evaluation, and outcome measures. Our health system must be evidence based and psychologists can provide assistance with research and evaluation. Psychologists are confident that evidence based decisions in health care will support the need for greater access to psychological services for primary health care. We have a quality health system in Alberta that must continue to change to ensure that quality service can be sustained over time to provide for the future for all Albertans. We look forward to working with other health professionals to achieve this goal.

### Recommendation #9

The ninth recommended reform is to recognize and promote Alberta’s health sector as a dynamic, powerful asset to the provincial economy. The PAA supports continued research under the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research to sustain our reputation as a leading center for health and medical research. Psychological research has been conducted through the support of this Foundation. Most recently, this research focused on the study of depression. Psychologists value the opportunity to take part in multi-disciplinary, integrated, provincial centers of excellence in health research. Psychology is an essential partner in research that examines mental illness and individual reactions to physical illness. We support public/private partnerships in health research. This approach has been successful in conducting psychological research in universities.

### Recommendation #10

The tenth recommended reform is to establish a clear transition plan to drive the process of change, oversee implementation of the recommendations, consider options, and monitor the impact. As psychologists, we understand the difficulty individuals and groups experience with change. This recommendation is critical for ensuring the success of the change process. Psychologists have a valuable contribution to make in this area and must be involved in the transition process. The individual chosen to lead this transition team must be able to access input from individuals with various areas of expertise. The PAA is available to provide any assistance needed during this process.

The position paper prepared by Mr. Bryan regarding enabling people and communities to take more responsibility for their own health care, demonstrates the importance of lifestyle changes in determining lifespan, reduced disability, quality of life, and lowered health costs. The psychological response to lifestyle choices and to illness can have a positive and dramatic impact on the individual's health, while reducing the requirement for community response and decreasing the need for, and cost of health services. The positive impact of psychological support and therapy in response to cardiovascular disease has been demonstrated in several studies. Early interventions that include psychological components enhance the quality of life for the individual and reduce costs to the health care system. Psychologists have a critical role to play in treating mental illness and depression, and in suicide prevention. These health problems are costly for the health care system but also drain financial resources in other areas. Hidden factors include the reduction of the contributions individuals make to our community during times of illness and the burden of cost carried by our publicly funded police and justice systems as a result of either criminal or civil behaviors that can arise from mental or physical health related issues.

The PAA agrees that consideration must be given to the relationship of certain social, economic, and education gradients with health status to provide for the long-term health care that is in the best interests of Albertans. The PAA values the opportunity to work with other professionals, community leaders, industry and business leaders, and relevant government ministries to address this challenge. The PAA supports and contributes to programs to modify lifestyle choices by individual Albertans, especially parents with young children. Psychologists have the skills and tools to address addictions, health choices, and motivation to change. We can consult with other primary care providers to provide a coordinated team approach to this complex but important goal. All health care professionals must have the education to encourage and support healthy life style choices by Albertans. Psychologists are leaders in this area and can provide the necessary communication of these skills to the health care community.

The PAA is pleased to see this initiative taken by the government of Alberta to address our health care needs. We support new approaches and "made in Alberta" solutions. The PAA supports compensation for all health professionals that adequately reflects their education, skills, and experience. Psychologists have much to contribute to the

health of Albertans. Encouraging and educating Albertans to stay healthy will not only address cost containment and sustainability issues, but will enhance our quality of life. The PAA supports the recommendations made by the advisory council. Psychologists are ready and able to take a leadership role in contributing to positive changes in health care for Albertans.

Thank you for this opportunity to participate in this initiative. We look forward to working with the government and with other health care professionals to enhance the quality of life for all Albertans.

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