

Increased support for mental health, new model of primary care, change in how physicians paid are best prescription for improving health care in this province: Saskatchewan College of Family Physicians

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In the leadup to the October 26th provincial election, the organization representing the province's 1,400 family physicians and family medicine trainees has identified three priorities for improving health care. The Saskatchewan College of Family Physicians (SCFP) is calling on all parties to support increased funding for mental health, adoption of an approach to primary care called the Patient's Medical Home, and paying doctors for quality rather than quantity of services.

SCFP president Dr. Myles Deutscher says the pandemic has shone a spotlight on shortcomings in the way primary health is currently organized and delivered in Saskatchewan. "Family physicians are struggling under the weight of trying to improve access while using health care resources wisely," says Dr. Deutscher. "Our organization has identified three changes that will ensure care is easier to access, patient-centred, and comprehensive."

Increased funding for mental health

SCFP recommends that counselling and other mental health services be fully funded by the provincial government in the same way that other medical services are, and that they be integrated into existing primary care practices rather than being a standalone service. Private counselling services are not currently part of the public health care system.

According to Dr. Deutscher, while some patients may be able to access what limited counselling is available through the public system or have coverage through their employer, Saskatchewan's most vulnerable residents face a serious gap. "As family physicians, we have seriously ill patients waiting months to see a psychiatrist through the public system who can't afford to pay for counselling or other supports while they wait."

Patient's Medical Home

The SCFP is calling on government to endorse -- and begin to shift funding toward -- a model of primary care that would see almost all of a patient's needs met under one roof, by an interdisciplinary team of health care professionals that includes not only physicians but also nurse educators, mental health professionals, and pharmacists. Clinics across Canada following this approach cost the health system less because their patients have fewer hospital stays and emergency department visits. The model is endorsed by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), and Canadian Nurses Association (CNA).

“For patients, this will mean it’s easier for them to get the kinds of care they need, when it works best for them,” says Dr. Deutscher. “For physicians, this model of team-based means higher job satisfaction. And for the health system, it means better quality care with little or no change in overall cost.”

Physician payment

The SCFP is recommending the province investigate other models for paying physicians that are more flexible, encourage innovation in how care is organized and delivered, and increase collaboration across different types of care providers. Around 60% of Saskatchewan family physicians are currently paid solely on a fee-for-service basis. Family physicians are concerned about increasing overhead expenses and their ability to provide the type of care that meets their patients’ complex needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the weaknesses of fee-for-service and the disparity between different approaches to physician remuneration.

“The current fee-for-service model incentivizes volume,” says Dr. Deutscher. “It is an outdated model that does not benefit our patients. We need to pay physicians for providing the types of care that are proven to keep people healthy and out of the health care system.”

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The Saskatchewan College of Family Physicians is a chapter of the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), which represents around 40,000 members across the country. The CFPC is the professional organization responsible for establishing standards for the training and certification of family physicians. It reviews and accredits continuing professional development programs and materials that enable family physicians to meet certification and licensing requirements and lifelong learning interests. It also accredits postgraduate family medicine training in Canada’s 17 medical schools. The College provides quality services, supports family medicine teaching and research, and advocates on behalf of family physicians and the specialty of family medicine.

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