

The Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario (AFHTO) is the not-for-profit association representing team-based primary care. We provide leadership to promote high-quality, comprehensive, well-integrated interprofessional primary care for the benefit of Ontarians. We are the advocate and resource to support the spread of knowledge and best practice among 191 interprofessional primary care teams, including family health teams (FHTs), nurse practitioner-led clinics (NPLCs) and others who provide team-based care.

As government undergoes public health modernization, AFHTO is pleased to provide a few recommendations to better align primary care with public health. Together with government, we will build more coordinated, integrated and person-centered health care for the people of Ontario.

1. Strengthen the relationship between primary care and public health to better align with health system transformation

“A greater emphasis on primary care can be expected to lower the costs of care, improve health through access to more appropriate services and reduce inequities in the population’s overall health.”ⁱ This seminar research by the late Dr. Barbara Starfield and colleagues forms the basis of what many jurisdictions agree to be true – an investment in creating a robust primary health care system will lead to a higher performing health system with better patient outcomes and less cost to the system. It is widely believed that primary health care systems can be enhanced by building stronger collaborations between primary care (PC) and public health (PH) sectors.ⁱⁱ



Figure 2: Quadruple Aim and Desired Outcomes

The Public Health Agency defines the population health approach as *“an approach to health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups”ⁱⁱⁱ*. Primary care, like public health, has been at the forefront of population health care service delivery as care has been directed at improving the health of the population with a focus of wholistic and comprehensive care from womb to tomb.

The massive health system transformation that is currently underway, especially the formation of the Ontario Health Teams (OHT),

presents an opportunity for better alignment between the two sectors. This will provide upstream care to prevent hospitalization and reduce hallway healthcare. We are pleased that OHTs are predicated on the principles of the Quadruple Aim, which aims for better patient and population health outcomes. In alignment with that, ***we recommend that public health be better integrated within the health system planning as a full partner that, alongside primary care, ensures prevention, health promotion, wellbeing, and chronic disease management be part of the full continuum of care for patients and the population being served.***

2. Improved communications and integrated digital health systems

A focus of ongoing health system transformation is the adoption of digital health tools to support patient care and to cut red tape for health care providers. To modernize care in Ontario, the government is working to adopt digital health solutions that will support effective health care delivery and ongoing quality and performance improvement, leading to a better patient experience.

People want assurances that they have a ‘hub’ that has their story all under one roof, is well connected to other parts of the health and social systems, and that has their well-being top of mind. It needs to be a place that is constantly adapting to patient needs and ensuring information is placed in the patient’s hands.

The health community is already embracing digital innovations, but progress is slow. Many primary care practices are using secure encrypted email or text with their patients to better communicate and meet patient needs, but these approaches are not well integrated in the patient’s electronic medical record.

Communications between all health sectors is poor due to the lack of interoperability between the various electronic medical records (EMR). Better integration of the province’s EMRs is paramount. All Ontarians should have one EMR with their full health story.

Though the ideal state is to create one electronic medical record for patients, in absence of adopting one EMR for the province, we suggest thought be given on how better to integrate, connect, and coordinate health promotion, health protection, and health care between primary care and public health. This would allow more integration of public health units with primary care in spheres like immunization, disease prevention, and health promotion. It also provides a more fulsome picture of an individual’s health journey. It is 2020 and letters of suspension are still being sent to students’ homes because immunization information is not shared by parents with their local health units. This type of information should be transferred from primary care or pediatrician offices’ through electronic means, not solely left to the parents and schools to communicate.

3. Establish local public health service delivery areas that are aligned with Ontario Health Teams

Ensuring consistency and uniformity in public health services across proposed regional OHTs is needed and would be welcomed. Aligning resources with local needs and delivering services through local public health service delivery areas would make service delivery more doable and specific to the needs of the community. ***We suggest delivery areas be aligned with Ontario Health Teams or with existing municipal boundaries to avoid confusion for providers who are seeking local resources or supports.***

The importance of a sustained relationship between patients and their primary care team is a defining characteristic of family medicine, and it is something that both patients and providers consider to be the

foundation of the care partnership. The longer the relationship, the more the trust builds. This also pertains to relationships with partners. Linking public health entities with municipalities and community partners, like primary health care teams, to coordinate the efforts to sustain local population health is important for care to be truly patient-centric and delivered at the local level. Public health, as leaders of population health, should help support the formation of OHTs and advance the agenda of health promotion, disease prevention, and, most importantly, public health surveillance, with its numerous productive collaborations within the health care sector.

Public health, at the local and provincial levels, have taken exceptional leadership with the sharing of information, resources and tools with the recent 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019 n-CoV) outbreak. Their diligence and ongoing communication with the health care sector has been appreciated and highlights that public health is critical to keeping our population safe, ensuring its security and protecting it from the spread of infectious disease and environmental hazards. We need to ensure that public health is fully integrated within the full health care system so that Ontarians have the benefit of high-quality health care services that are closer to home and help achieve the best possible health outcomes.

Please address questions to Kavita Mehta, CEO, at kavita.mehta@afhto.ca or 647-204-0212.

ⁱ Starfield et al, “Contributions of Primary Care to the Health Systems and Health”, Millbank Quarterly, 83(3), 2005.

ⁱⁱ CIHR - Institute of Population and Public Health. The Future of Public Health in Canada: Developing a Public Health System for the 21st Century, June 2003. 1-58. 2003. 27-5-0008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Public Health Agency of Canada. What is the Population Approach? Accessed February 7, 2020 at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/population-health-approach.html#What>.