



## **PRIMARY HEALTH CARE**

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### **What is Primary Health Care?**

Primary health care is usually the first place patients go when they need health advice or care and it is the place responsible for co-ordinating the access to other parts of the health care system.

Examples include visits to family doctors, nurses practitioners and mental health workers; telephone calls to health information lines; and advice received from pharmacists. It is also the best part of the health care system to prevent illness and injury and promote good health.

### **Why is it important to renew primary care?**

Primary health care can keep Canadians out of emergency rooms when all they need is information and advice, it can free up beds for seriously ill Canadians by avoiding or delaying hospitalization, and ensure quick access to the best provider for their needs (not always a doctor).

Primary health care goes beyond sickness care and helps Canadians take preventive measures and promotes healthy choices. It will lessen the burden on the health care system and will help maintain and improve our overall health and quality of life.

The chief objective of primary health care reform is to ensure all Canadians, wherever they live, have access to the right care at the right time by the right provider, including access to appropriate and urgent care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

### **Benefits for Canadians**

- Timely access to a team of health care providers to address health problems and to ensure patients receive the information, advice and services they need to prevent avoidable illnesses and to stay healthy;
- Greater focus on health promotion and better support for Canadians' efforts to make lifestyle choices to maintain and improve their health;

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- A supportive environment for health care providers which enhances both their professional satisfaction and their own ability to make healthy lifestyle choices.

## **Progress to Date**

In 1997, the Government of Canada created a \$150 million Health Transition Fund which identified primary health care as one of four priority areas for renewing the health care system. It supported innovative projects that tested new ways to deliver services, including teams of health professionals working together. Renewal efforts were further accelerated in 2000 and 2003, when the Prime Minister and Provincial and Territorial Premiers committed to a common vision for primary health care renewal across the country.

Announced in 2000, the \$800 million Primary Health Care Transition Fund (2000-2006) is helping improve primary health care by providing provinces, territories and national health associations with the resources needed to change the way primary health care is organized and delivered (e.g., better use of technology, new strategies to manage chronic diseases, and improve access to care in aboriginal communities).

For example, several provinces such as Alberta and Manitoba have implemented telephone health advice lines, while others, such as Ontario, have expanded on telehealth technology in northern Aboriginal communities which allows physicians to monitor heart rates and do teleophthamology (eye screening), among many other health promoting activities, from hundreds of miles away.

In February 2003, the Prime Minister and the Premiers agreed to the Accord on Health Care Renewal, which identified primary health care as one of the priority areas for reform. The ultimate goal of primary health care reform is to provide all Canadians, wherever they live, with access to an appropriate health care provider, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. First Ministers expect at least 50% of their residents to have access to this type of system by 2011.

A \$16 billion Health Reform Transfer was established by the federal government to provide the provinces and territories funding to accelerate the agreed-upon reforms. All provinces and territories are expected to report to their public later this year.