

HOME HEALTH CONCERNS: FUTURE REFORM UNCERTAIN

Submitted by the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario

While the government proceeds with consultations on how to reform Canada's health-care system, registered nurses are waiting for action to address the increasing problems that plague home healthcare and other areas of community nursing.

Health and Long-Term Care Minister Tony Clement recently announced that the Ontario government's spending on home care will be frozen, which could erode this vital sector of the health-care system (through which nurses provide care for patients in their homes). Home care has become increasingly important to both existing and potential patients, but the Ontario government's announcement compounds the serious problems facing home-care providers.

It is clear, with the recent release of a poll by VHA Home HealthCare indicating that 82% of Ontarians are worried about access to home health care as they age, that people are paying attention to the increasingly important role of community nurses, which also include nurses working in shelters, community centres, churches, and on the street. A lack of attention to home-care issues could paralyze the health-care system, as suggested by newspaper reports of overcrowded and occasionally chaotic emergency-rooms where patients occupy hospital beds because there is no home care available.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care currently spends \$1.6 billion (4% of its health-care budget) on home health care annually. According to VHA Home HealthCare, it will likely take another \$100 million to address some of nurses' key concerns, including pressure to decrease visit time per patient (leaving little time for required care), minimal (if any) clinical management support, fewer opportunities for ongoing clinical education to ensure quality of care for sicker patients, and increasing administrative duties related to the managed competition system. These factors, combined with lower wages (home-health nurses are paid \$5 to \$7 per hour less than their counterparts in hospitals and institutions) have contributed to high turnover rates in recent years and have left fewer nurses with more patients. Recent statistics show that the profile of today's home-care patients has changed from that of individuals who need basic care to early discharged hospital patients in need of more complex treatment. With 80% of home-care

patients requiring high intensity after-hospital care, these home-health nurses are taking on increasing responsibility.

Home health care in Canada can be traced back more than 400 years – when caring for the sick was voluntary and usually the work of skilled nuns. Today, nurses, no matter who they work for in the home health sector, have seen the effects of government restructuring, and have been left to deal with unstable working conditions created through “managed competition” in the community sector – whereby health-care agencies submit bids to Community Care Access Centres to provide services to patients.

Home-health care is a specialty nursing practice. The home-health nurse's role includes holistic care through the evaluation of a patient's social, psychological and physical ability to deal with illness or injury. Thus, treatment is more than visiting patients in their homes and completing a specific task. It includes assessing the patient's surroundings and support mechanisms, to ensure an atmosphere conducive to healing.

The challenges of coping with weather and traffic conditions, the insecurity of work hours, and the significant wage disparity between community and hospital sector nursing have increased the difficulty of recruiting qualified nurses to the community sector. Cutbacks in supplies have left nurses without sufficient materials to do their jobs. Thus, fewer nurses are interested in pursuing work in the community sector.

Former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow's review of Canada's Medicare system (with recommendations due November 2002) should shed some light on whether home care will be granted the same status that hospital care receives in the Canada Health Act. More than 5 years ago, Canada's National Forum on Health recommended that universal coverage be extended to health services provided in the home. With a reassessment of the allocation of dollars to provide more direct patient care, home-health nurses can focus on the essential service of making our communities healthier, and improving the quality of life for patients in the comfort of their homes.