

## Family Health Teams: New Models of Care Need Specialized Coverage

October 6, 2021

A family health team (FHT) combines the talents and resources of a variety of primary care professionals to improve access to and quality of care, enhance collaboration across disciplines, enhance patient engagement, and support coordination of care.

More than a decade has passed since FHTs were introduced in Canada. Last year, the Ontario government announced it would provide \$2.4 million to support the establishment of 13 additional Ontario Health Teams across the province to provide better, more connected patient care. (1) Healthcare teams are a new way of delivering care in which providers and organizations collaborate as one to improve patient outcomes. This new collaborative model will enable provinces to respond more quickly and effectively to COVID-19 and end hallway health care. To that end, Ontario invested approximately \$28 million to support the 42 teams in fiscal year 2020-2021. (1)

### What are Family Health Teams?

A FHT is a primary health care service delivered by a team of family physicians, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, social workers, dietitians, and other healthcare professionals. Each team is based on local health and community needs, so people receive the care they need in their communities.

A FHT is responsible for:

- Delivering care for their patients
- Understanding their patients' health care history
- Easing their transition from one provider to another
- Directly connecting them to the different types of care they need
- Providing 24/7 help in navigating the health care system.

The FHTs were created to expand access to comprehensive family health care. In Ontario alone, over 3.4 million patients are enrolled in FHTs in over 200 communities across the province. (2)

## **Serving rural populations and addressing specialized health needs**

In addition to serving rural areas and northern communities, FHTs offer primary care services to distinct population groups with specialized needs.

A homeless men's health clinic that is operated by the Seaton House shelter in Toronto, for example, provides services for homeless males who live in four locations. There are programs and services available through the FHT that address the high incidence of mental illness and addiction.

The FHT in East Elgin serves people from all over the world, regardless of their religious background, who utilize all the services the team offers. A translation service is also available from the local Mennonite Community Services organization.

Vanier has an Akausivik Inuit FHT which provides care to Ottawa's Inuit population. In order to ensure culturally grounded health care, the FHT takes into account the Elder's role in providing information and advice, promotes strong community cohesion by maintaining ties with the Inuit community, and offers programs and services that respect the Inuit culture. (2)

## **A new model of primary care**

FHTs emerged as a result of healthcare system reform. At present, it is unknown how FHTs compare to other major models of primary care over time. Canadian governments, provinces, and territories have therefore prioritized strengthening PHC systems.

The latest Ontario Primary Care Report reported that capitation-based models such as FHTs and others tend to have somewhat healthier and wealthier populations than other models of care.

The majority of FHTs are located outside of major urban centers, and they serve a small number of recent immigrants. Due to the choice of payment models available to physicians, the patterns probably reflect the way in which certain types of practices are favoured by incentives such as capitation and bonuses. The capitation model involves the physician being paid in advance for the services they provide per patient and per unit of time consumed. Providers are required to comply with a set of specific services in the contract before signing a capitation agreement.

There were few differences in trends between models of care in terms of health care utilization over time. The FHTs had better performance in cancer screening and diabetes care than the fee-for-service models, but did not always outperform the capitation models. (3)

## Common claims at FHTs and other multidisciplinary clinics

- Insufficient communication between clinical specialists, resulting in the development of serious health problems without notice
- The medical equipment fails, resulting in a failure to diagnose and treat the patient
- Overworked and/or underqualified medical staff
- Burnout or low morale among the clinical team
- A medical assistant, who is the main patient contact at multidisciplinary clinics, is unable to identify red flags about health issues with patients
- The specialist doesn't receive authorization to discuss a patient's medical records, resulting in serious health problems for the patient

## When something goes wrong, who is responsible?

It is essential to consider who is responsible for patient care and outcomes in team-based situations, as the answer is not always obvious. A Family Health Team is a small, but complex environment, which requires specialized insurance coverage.

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Sources:

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