

What a novel idea!

Putting patients at the centre of our health-care system

WHEN YOU OR A FAMILY MEMBER

needs medical care, what do you expect as a Canadian from our country's system of universal, publicly paid health care?

Do you think the health-care system does a good job of putting patients first?

Do you think Canada could get more for the \$200 billion a year it spends on health care?

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) thinks we can. The CMA thinks that by putting a plan in place now, Canadians could have no less than the best health and best health-care system in the world by 2025.

In listening to Canadians earlier this year, we at the CMA heard moving stories about the devotion of doctors and other health-care workers to their patients. But we were also dismayed to hear about gaps in the system in areas such as mental health; about shortages of health-care professionals leading to long waits for specialist care or diagnostics; and about difficulties in navigating a complex system that's often less than user-friendly.

Getting medically necessary care shouldn't be frustrating, confusing, upsetting or financially draining, but all too often it is. That's simply unacceptable in a prosperous, modern country such as ours.

Studies show that Canadians are generally happy with the care they receive — once they receive that care. It's not individual health-care providers who are letting them down, but the system itself.

This is why one of the current catchphrases used in discussing health-care reform is patient-centred care. It refers to the concept of making sure

that patients have seamless access to the care they need, when they need it and where they need it. It is health care that takes into consideration the individual needs of patients, and their families, and treats them with respect and dignity. As our kids might say, well, duh.

Obviously the health-care system should focus on patients, but the fact is, the system often revolves around itself, creating barriers to patient care. At times, it seems the patient ends up being lost in the shuffle.

The CMA, representing 75,000 Canadian doctors, thinks it's time for a change. We're working with nurses and other health-care providers to push for a major



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overhaul of the Canadian medical system, so that it puts you, the patient, first.

Experience elsewhere shows that a system providing patient-centred care should start off with an agreement on rights and responsibilities. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have set out patients' rights in charters. This empowers patients by laying out the standards of and accessibility to health care they should expect.

In Australia, there are seven charter rights to which patients, consumers, carers and families are entitled. They are: access, safety, respect, communication, participation, privacy and the right to comment on care and have concerns addressed. Doesn't this sound perfectly reasonable?

In Canada, it appears Alberta may be the first province to put such a charter

in place, and we hope that other provinces follow suit.

I do not know a single physician who does not want to provide his or her patients with compassionate, timely care and high-quality care that is accessible and free of gaps.

A patient charter is a really good start toward empowering us all to make this a reality for every doctor and every patient.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "John Haggie". The signature is stylized and written in cursive.

John Haggie, MD
President, Canadian Medical Association