

B.C. introducing primary care innovations June 2010

Every British Columbian who wants one will have a family doctor by 2015, Health Services Minister Kevin Falcon promised June 24 in announcing a \$137 million overhaul of the primary health care system. Currently there are at least 250,000 people in this predicament.

“Ensuring that British Columbians have access to their own family doctor – a health professional who is familiar with their medical history – can drastically improve health outcomes for patients and in doing so, can help ensure the sustainability of our health system.” Mr. Falcon said.

High needs patients, frail seniors and patients with chronic diseases will also be provided with enhanced care planning and support with an individualized and coordinated personal medical health-care plan linking together various health professionals to provide better quality care.

Patients with higher needs will have access to innovative models of care. This will include faster access to medical consultations with specialists following the introduction of a new payment mechanism in April. It allows family physicians to get immediate telephone access to a medical specialist for a telephone consultation.

But the central idea to the primary care overhaul is the aggressive expansion of Divisions of Family Practice announced in January 2009. These are the brainchild of the General Practice Services Committee – a joint government, B.C. Medical Association (BCMA) group.

There are currently three such divisions involving 250 family physicians (membership is open) with each one set up as a society. Members work with the local health authority and community agencies through a collaborative services committee to develop and implement solutions for region-specific issues affecting the delivery of health services at the community level – including access to a family physician.

New approaches to building capacity are going to be tried as well. This could involve offering group consultations for patients with chronic diseases instead of the traditional one-on-one sessions.

Mr. Falcon hopes there will be broader use of the province's 190 nurse practitioners in integrated primary and community care. A government and BCMA working group is being established to explore this further.

The government is also considering the use of patient-focused funding to support primary care beginning next year. This model was introduced at 23 of the province's largest hospitals in April and offers incentives for services to be delivered at a competitive set price.

The government plans to add five more Divisions of Family Practice soon and perhaps as many as 20 by the fall. By next March, the program is expected to spread to more than 40 communities and regions, and province wide by 2015.

There is more information on this announcement at www.gov.bc.ca/health/index.html under News. The Divisions of Family Practice website is www.divisionsbc.ca. HE