

Alberta looking at broader role for Primary Care Networks July 17, 2010

Alberta is considering handing more power to Primary Care Networks, a model of multidisciplinary primary care launched five years ago and which currently serves almost two-thirds of the population. A discussion paper prepared by Alberta Health Services on primary care reform has been obtained by the Edmonton Journal and was the subject of a front-page story Saturday.

There are 35 Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in Alberta with another eight in development. They are the product of the Primary Care Initiative in the 2003 contract agreement between the government, the Alberta Medical Association and the nine former health regions which have since been rolled up into Alberta Health Services (AHS).

This agreement is up for renewal next year and, according to the Journal, AHS wants to use this opportunity to move PCNs “to the next level.”

These networks bring together teams of health professionals to improve access to care, and enhance treatment for specific groups of patients such as those with chronic diseases.

The discussion paper apparently sees them doing much more than this in the future. The Journal says they would also have responsibility for mental health and some public health services and home care as part of an overall goal to reduce use of hospitals and improve preventive care.

The radical change in primary care delivery in Alberta is inspired by the UK’s Primary Care Trusts. They provide a range of primary care services to local populations, including purchasing some hospital services on behalf of patients. They are responsible for spending some 80 per cent of the UK’s National Health Service budget and have an incentive to manage their financial resources as efficiently as possible.

Coincidentally, British Health Secretary Andrew Lansley released a [White Paper](#) Monday in which the government is proposing to replace Primary Care Trusts in three years with another approach which gives general practitioners even more authority. They will be obliged to form consortia to purchase a complete range of services on behalf of patients, including those provided by hospitals and private providers.

It is part of a sweeping reform of the National Health Service that seeks to cut 20-billion pounds from its current 104-billion-pound budget by 2014. Management will be reduced by 45 per cent, and the private sector will be invited to have a larger role including providing administrative support to these new GP-led consortia.

Even if the AHS primary care reforms do not go this far, GPs in Alberta could well be taking on more administrative responsibility. This is something which University of Alberta political scientist John Church says physicians are ill-equipped to handle. He says AHS should be looking at beefing up the use of existing community clinics which involve the public in management decisions.

He told the Journal that there should be public discussion of the AHS proposed reforms. HE