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ISSUE BRIEF

F. Optimization of professional scopes of practice

Resolved, that governments in Canada collaborate to define and implement innovative approaches to optimizing scopes of practice across all health care professionals.

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ISSUE

Scope of practice innovation has emerged in recent years as a response to demographic and financial stresses faced by the Canadian healthcare system. Despite the great promise shown by many innovations, implementation of innovative approaches to scope of practice optimization across the country is slow. A new and innovative approach to collaboration and coordination on this issue nationally is required to facilitate and accelerate change.

BACKGROUND

Recent shifts in the socio-demographic and epidemiologic profile of Canadians, transformations in technology, and ongoing concern over the return on investment in healthcare have led to a wide recognition of the need for innovation in the transformation of the Canadian healthcare system.

One approach to dealing with these system stresses is innovation to professional scopes of practice that aims to rebalance the roles and responsibilities of healthcare professionals in multidisciplinary teams. Examples of such innovations can be seen throughout health systems worldwide and evidence shows that optimizations to scope of practice has led to improved access to care and reduced wait times, while maintaining the quality of care patients expect.

In recent years, innovative approaches to professional scopes of practice have become more commonplace in Canada. The nurse practitioner role, whereby advanced practice nurses take on responsibilities beyond the traditional scope of the nursing profession (e.g., prescribing), has been implemented across most of the country. Evidence shows that this scope of practice innovation has led to improved access to health services, reduced wait times and lessened pressures on the health-care system by providing clients with diagnosis and curative interventions, wellness strategies and early interventions. Expansion of the pharmacist's scope of practice to include prescribing has also been adopted in many Canadian provinces in an effort to help enhance patient access to elements of primary care. This innovative approach has been shown to improve patient outcomes in diseases like hypertension and improve access to interventions like immunizations.

Despite the evidence of benefit, the spread of both these innovations is hindered by barriers inherent to the Canadian healthcare system and government. In fact, a lack of national coordination was identified by both the Canadian Nurse Practitioner Initiative (CNPI) and the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) as a barrier to full implementation.

This lack of coordination is something felt just as acutely by those in the earlier stages of scope of practice optimization, leading innovative approaches to scope of practice optimization to stall at a local level. The recent efforts of the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists (CAMRT) to create broader uptake of advanced practice roles in radiation therapy is a case in point. This innovation to MRT scope of practice was first explored by Cancer Care Ontario more than a decade ago. Pilot roles, in specialist areas such as palliative and head and neck radiation therapy, have since demonstrated improved patient access to care and decreased wait times for cancer treatment. Despite this evidence, as well as corroborating evidence for similar roles abroad and widespread acknowledgement of the benefits of this role in the radiation therapy community, lack of coordination and variability in legislation and regulation across the country continues to hinder sharing this potentially transformative development.

National spread and increased speed of the adoption of innovation in the healthcare system has been a focus for a number of prominent Canadian voices, including the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, the Canadian College of Health Leaders, HealthCareCAN, and the Health Action Lobby (HEAL). In its December 2014 report entitled *Accelerating Innovation and Improving Health System Performance*, HEAL calls on the federal government to play a transformational role, working in strategic partnership with the provinces and territories to accelerate the spread of evidence-based innovations that benefit the health of Canadians. It identifies health human resources (HHR) as a key strategic target in achieving this goal. Canadian provinces, acting through the Health Care Innovation Working Group (HCIWG) of the Council of the Federation, also recognize the need for collaboration in HHR. Their recommendation from *The First Report of the Health Care Innovation Working Group* endorses deep collaboration through sharing of information, expertise and projections, respecting interdependence of provinces and integration of planning.



The precedent for successful collaboration on innovation is clear. According to the HCIWG, collaboration on pharmaceuticals has resulted in combined savings of \$260 million for the provinces annually. Enhanced collaboration related to optimizing professional scopes of practice has the potential to alleviate barriers and potentiate the spread of important innovations.

CONSIDERATIONS

If the status quo is maintained, financially, governments may save on investment to strengthen collaboration, but they risk losing out on the financial benefits that innovative approaches to optimizing scopes of practice can impart. If the issue of professional scopes of practice is not addressed with coordination and collaboration at multiple levels, innovation to scopes of practice will continue to face barriers to adoption and spread. Without coordination, transformative new roles will evolve locally, but may vary substantially across jurisdictions and take decades to be implemented for the benefit of the wider Canadian public.

If the federal government or national agencies take a leadership role in spreading innovative approaches to optimizing professional scopes of practice, this would allow for the innovations to be studied and spread in a coordinated way. The benefits of shared information and experiences would potentially quicken the spread of useful innovations. Financially, this will require some investment, but this will be offset by the benefits imparted by the adoption of useful innovations. Politically, this might require a shift in role for the federal government. Further, a federally-coordinated approach could meet resistance from other stakeholders if the willingness to collaborate is not mutual.

The federal government, provincial governments, healthcare leaders, creators of innovation and professional bodies will all play a role in collaborating to optimize professional scopes of practice. Their possible roles are described below.

NEXT STEPS

In keeping with the 2014 HEAL recommendations on accelerating innovation in the Canadian healthcare system, a key initiation step in this process will be federal leadership for collaboration.

Governments, professional regulatory bodies, accrediting boards, and professional bodies all have a role to play in the optimization of professional scopes of practice.

The Federal government must partner with national stakeholders to host forums on the feasibility, harmonization and optimization of scopes of practice in healthcare professions across the country, and the potential for adoption of innovation models among all potential partners. Federal, provincial and territorial representatives must present their views and hear from international experts, with a view to furthering collaboration to address scope of practice challenges. The very powerful *Optimizing Scopes of Practice* report by the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences suggests this could be accomplished through measures that include a national summit, an infrastructure for evidence and evaluation, research funds for this purpose, and guidelines for innovative approaches.

Provincial and territorial governments must identify this issue as a priority for the Council of the Federation and participate in meaningful discussion about innovations to scope of practice.



Stakeholder organizations such as HealthCareCAN must continue to act in a leadership role and make innovation approaches to optimizing scopes of practice a strategic priority following HealthCareCAN's March 2015 submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health.

The CAMRT and other national associations must continue to identify and advocate for innovative approaches. These organizations must continue to act through the HEAL and independently help initiate broad collaboration on the issue of scopes of practice and work together to share evidence and coordinate the contribution of experts in their professional fields.

This brief was prepared by: Mark Given, Director, Professional Practice, Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists (CAMRT)

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