

Advocating for Psychologists in every primary care facility so all Ontarians have access to the right mental health care, at the right place, at the right time, by the right provider.

Background and Concerns

Psychologists* can perform a critical and comprehensive “triage agent” role in primary care settings like Family Health Teams (FHTs), Community Health Centres, and NP-led Clinics. In addition, Psychologists are frequently found to be practicing as a member of a virtual team with family physicians and other community-based healthcare professionals. With the highest level of education and training in mental health, Psychologists can conduct comprehensive assessments, diagnose, develop a care plan, and triage patients to the most appropriate and cost-effective treatment provider (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, social worker, mental health worker).

Key Points and Challenges

FHTs and other primary care practices should provide services to address both the physical and mental health needs of Ontarians. The majority of FHTs have hired social workers that do not provide comprehensive psychological assessment and cannot perform the controlled act of diagnosis. This appears to be based on the perception that Psychologists and social workers provide the same kinds and levels of services, and that social workers, with their lower base salary, are more cost-effective.

In fact, many FHTs, CHCs, NP-Clinics, and family practices have recognized that their patients are not receiving the right care from the right provider, and are now trying to find room in their funding for Psychologists.

Proper assessment, diagnosis and care planning are key to ensuring Ontarians receive timely and appropriate intervention. Determining a care plan and identifying the right health professional to provide treatment enhances the cost-effectiveness of services. Social workers provide excellent services within their scope of practice, but cannot address significant psychological disorders. Patients who require medication to control symptoms must see a physician. Psychotherapists are adept at dealing with communication, relationship issues, stress, and low mood. With a comprehensive assessment and an accurate diagnosis, psychologists in the triage agent role will ensure the right treatment will be provided by the right healthcare professional in the right settings to enhance recovery. The alternative is the emergency department – and we can do better than to rely on the ED as our backup option – and often as the only option.

Issues and OPA Recommendations to Ontario’s Government

Provide funding for every FHT, CHC, and NP-led clinic in the province to hire Psychologists – and let them become the hub for linking psychological services in their communities. Most communities have Psychologists that function in private practices and often with private sector funding envelopes. Let’s use the team-based practices to integrate all providers in communities and foster private-public integration or services to address unmet mental health needs for people of all ages and their family members challenged by mental illnesses and additions.

It will be imperative to review the calculation of hours (FTE) based on roster size. For example, one full-time position for 50,000 patients is inadequate and only allows psychologists to assume a consultant role rather than providing services to their full scope of practice (assessment, diagnosis, treatment).

In addition to Clinical Psychologists, with broad expertise in mental health and addictions, Health Psychologists provide integral services to those suffering from chronic diseases (CHD, COPD, diabetes) and also a focus on prevention.

Neuropsychologists and Rehabilitation Psychologists assess, diagnose and treat stroke, degenerative brain diseases (such as dementia), and acquired brain injury.

Services provided by Psychologists will help Ontarians maintain their health, improve functional independence, perform well at home, at work, and in school, and age in place. Homelessness, poverty, and criminality will be reduced and result in significant cost savings in the areas of welfare, disability, and the justice system. Psychologists are the answer to leveling the playing field in the primary care sector so that every Ontarian has access to early identification of mental illnesses and addictions and evidence-based treatments at the right time, in the right place by the right provider.

* The term “Psychologist” in this document refers both to doctoral-level Psychologists and masters-level “Psychological Associates”. For information on the extensive training required to become a registered Psychologist or Psychological Associate, please see: www.cpo.on.ca