

Commentary: Empowering Primary Care Nurses – Unlocking Access, Enhancing Quality and Addressing Social Determinants of Health

Sylvain Brousseau, PhD, RN, FNMRCIS, FAAN
Associate Professor of Nursing
Université du Québec en Outaouais
Gatineau, QC
Past President
Canadian Nurses Association
Past President
Quebec Nurses Association

Introduction

Canadians are facing significant healthcare challenges, including overcrowded emergency rooms, lack of access to primary care (PC) services and an overburdened healthcare workforce. These will require concerted efforts from all levels of government, starting with engaging nurses in the modernization of the Canadian healthcare transformation (Brousseau 2024).

Nurses can help strengthen the health system by improving access to PC and the quality of services by addressing the social determinants of health among vulnerable populations (Poitras et al. 2022) in urban, rural and remote areas, including a range of community health services (Brousseau 2024). Increasing nurse-led PC clinics will expand access care for the population. They assess, prescribe and screen the health of the population, engage in prevention/health promotion activities and provide health education to prevent chronic diseases (Poitras et al. 2022). By providing these multiple services in the community, nurses can also have a significant impact on reducing geographic and economic barriers to PC access (Poitras et al. 2022).

Quality of care is another area where nurses have a significant impact. With their knowledge and expertise in community health services, they provide quality care based on nursing research and clinical reasoning (Hudon et al. 2023). Their ability to provide patient-centred care improves not only health outcomes but also patient satisfaction in providing disease management, prevention and health

promotion information on nutrition, exercise and stress management, thereby reducing the need for emergency care.

Nurses are well positioned to address the determinants of health, such as socio-economic conditions, the physical environment and individual behaviours. They can identify social and environmental risk factors that enhance the health of the people they serve and help implement strategies in line with this intervention. For example, nurses can assess the needs of the population and facilitate access to community resources such as housing services and support groups (Valaitis et al. 2020). This information can influence the choice of interventions and the need to use other community resources. More broadly, PC nurses can advocate for progressive policies that address the social determinants of health to reduce health disparities and improve the lives of vulnerable populations (Poitras et al. 2022).

Recently, the minister of health proposed a new *Canada Health Act* services policy that should include the role of nurses in PC. This policy would help improve patient care by providing better access to a full range of health services within a team of health professionals in the community. Ultimately, it would also help reduce the workload of professionals in emergency departments, thereby improving the overall efficiency of the system and better meet the diverse and complex needs of the population (Lukewich et al. 2022; Karam et al. 2021; Valaitis et al. 2020).

In conclusion, politicians at all levels of government are urged to think outside the box and support investment in public nurse-led clinics in PC areas to improve the quality of care – a more sustainable and equitable health system for all Canadians. Enough talk, it is time for real and concrete action.

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