

A Wellness Foundation for Alberta: It's About Health. It's About Time.

Although isolated gains have been made in improving the health status of Albertans, a new approach for preventing chronic disease is required to significantly improve health outcomes across the entire population and to reduce the substantial demands on our health care system. A dedicated, well-financed and sustainable wellness foundation will transform the quality of life for all Albertans, lift the burden of preventable disease and disability, and enable Alberta to become the healthiest province in Canada.

A New Approach to Chronic Disease Prevention is Needed

Preventable chronic diseases are the leading cause of premature death and disability worldwide (1). Chronic diseases have a major impact on the physical and economic health of Albertans (2) and new cases are expected to rise in Alberta as the population increases and ages (3).

- In 2015, an estimated 6,500 Albertans will die from cancer and an estimated 17,000 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed (4).
- In 2013, approximately 125,000 Albertans suffered from ischemic heart disease (5). Cases of ischemic heart disease are projected to double by 2035 (6).
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is cited as the most common preventable reason for hospitalization in Alberta, with an estimated total inpatient cost of \$112 million per year (7, 8).
- In 2013, 21,500 new cases of diabetes were diagnosed (9). In 2013, approximately 6% of Albertans were living with diabetes (10).
- Over half of adults in Canada and Alberta, and over a quarter of Canadian children and adolescents are classified as overweight or obese, a known risk factor for chronic disease (11-14).
- In 2012, 1 in 5 Albertans is reported to have experienced an addiction or mental health problem (15).

The direct and indirect costs resulting from chronic diseases are a significant burden for all Albertans (2). The impact of preventable chronic disease is felt beyond the affected individual and has a ripple effect on the social and economic health of families, workplaces and communities (16). According to a recent 2015 study, the economic burden attributable to risk factors of chronic diseases including excess weight, tobacco smoking and physical inactivity in Canada was \$52.8 billion for 2013 (17). This includes \$23.3 billion attributable to excess weight, \$18.7 billion to tobacco smoking and \$10.8 billion to physical inactivity (17). Further, according to data from Alberta Health Services, the total costs attributable to obesity in Alberta was \$1.27 billion in 2005 (18). The direct and indirect costs of mental illness, another interrelated risk factor for poor health, are also very significant. Total spending in Alberta on mental health and addictions programs was an estimated \$753.8 million in the 2010-2011 fiscal year (15).

In 2014, the Alberta Government is estimated to have spent \$6,783 per capita on health care, with the majority (over 90%) spent on the treatment and management of diseases which are largely preventable

(19, 20). Unless future cases of chronic disease in Alberta can be prevented, our financially pressured and highly valued healthcare system will be inadequate to meet these acute care demands and will be unsustainable.

The good news is that over 40% of chronic disease can be prevented by taking action to reduce or avoid key risk factors including poor nutrition, physical inactivity, being overweight or obese, using tobacco and misusing alcohol (21). Promoting positive mental health is also a proven strategy for preventing chronic disease. Research shows that evidence-based early childhood interventions designed to prevent adverse childhood experiences will reduce risk for mental and physical health problems later in life (22, 23). Investments in early childhood to reduce mental health disorders is noted as a “best buy” for promoting positive mental health (23, 24) and an effective strategy for reducing risk for chronic diseases (22, 23, 25). Adults living with mental illness have a higher risk of developing chronic health conditions, and people suffering from chronic disease are twice as likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to the general population. These experiences may also result in the adoption of the risk behaviors noted above, in response to symptoms (26). Similarly, action to reduce or eliminate risks for injury and chronic disability can reduce behavioral risk factors (physical inactivity, substance use/misuse, mental health problems etc.) for other chronic diseases and improve quality of life (27).

A meaningful investment in a wellness foundation dedicated to addressing root causes of disease and preventing risk factors will have a profound impact on the healthcare system and the physical, mental and social health of Albertans.

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Investing in health promotion is good value for money. Research shows that a one dollar investment in health promotion can be expected to result in a \$4-5 cost savings (28). Some large scale interventions have produced a return on investment of up to 50:1 (29). Directing these investments into a dedicated and sustainable wellness foundation is a proven model for promoting health and preventing disease (30). In fact, a number of jurisdictions (including Australia, Austria, Switzerland, Thailand, Korea, Finland, Portugal and a few US states) have invested in health promotion foundations as a means for ensuring a long-term, evidence-based and dedicated focus on preventing disease and disability (30, 31). Over time, a foundation dedicated to ‘promoting health’ will ultimately contribute to a direct financial gain for government by providing savings in Alberta’s health care budget through unspent allocations no longer required for ‘repairing health’, or treating preventable diseases (32).

Several federal and provincial government commissions and reports have also explicitly recognized the good value of investments in prevention and health promotion in order to improve the health of Albertans in the long-term and lessen the demand on our health care system.

In 2002 both *The Health of Canadians – the Federal Role* (Kirby Report) and the *Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada* (Romanow Report) recognized that although the health care system is important to achieving good health, greater investment in health promotion and prevention is essential to improving the health of Canadians and decreasing health care costs (33, 34).

The same year, Alberta released *A Framework for Reform: Report of the Premiers Advisory Council on Health* (the Mazankowski Report) which concluded too little (approximately 3% of regional budgets) is typically invested in promotion, prevention and protection initiatives and recommended a focus on prevention to ensure Albertans *stay healthy*, as the “first reform” to our health care system (35).

Further, a 2011 report, entitled *Shaping Alberta’s Future: Report of the Premiers Council for Economic Strategy*, emphasized the need for Alberta to make strategic investments in the public services desired by Albertans and specifically recommended investments in early childhood and preventative measures to reduce the direct and indirect costs associated with the management of chronic diseases to reduce and sustain future spending on health care (36).

Wellness Alberta believes it is time to put these recommendations into action.

Principles of a Wellness Foundation in Alberta

The following principles are intended to guide the development of an effective wellness foundation that will meet its full potential in improving the health of Albertans (37).

Sustainability

Albertans expect a health care system that is both sustainable and reoriented to include a stronger focus on wellness (38). To meet these needs and expectations, funding for a dedicated wellness foundation must be adequate, long-term and separate from the existing health care budget.

We propose new investments equivalent to at least one percent of the total Alberta Health budget be devoted to a dedicated wellness foundation, or approximately \$200 million annually (39). This proposed funding formula has been referred to as the “one percent solution” (40). We recommend an initial investment of approximately \$60 million, increasing over 3 to 5 years to approximately \$196 million per year (39). This new one percent investment in a foundation would increase the Alberta Government’s commitment to funding health promotion and disease prevention to equal less than 5% of the total health operating budget in 2013-2014 (41).

Stable, long-term funding will enable a wide range of activities to occur over an extended period of time to effectively address the broad social determinants of health (42, 43). This funding can be derived from an appropriation of the Alberta government’s general revenue fund or by implementing a special ‘Wellness Levy’ on tobacco and alcohol products without affecting the existing healthcare budget.

Research indicates that Albertans would support this approach to funding. In 2014, the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention via the POWER UP! project surveyed senior decision-makers in government, schools, workplaces and media regarding investments in prevention. Ninety-five (95%) of Alberta respondents indicated they would support government action to reallocate 100% of tobacco tax revenue directly to health care and prevention (44). Seventy-two (72%) of Alberta respondents said they also would support the investment of alcohol revenue into these areas (44).

Surveys of the general public have also confirmed strong support for the foundation and the funding model (45). In March 2012 an Ipsos Reid survey found 80% of respondents would support the Alberta Government

to invest an additional one percent of the total healthcare budget (\$160 M) to create a wellness foundation dedicated to promoting healthy living and wellness in Alberta. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the respondents would also support this foundation to be independent of the provincial health care delivery system to help ensure its funding is protected over the long term. When presented with different sources of funding for a wellness foundation, 79% of Alberta respondents would support increasing tobacco taxes, 69% would support increasing alcohol taxes and 65% of respondents would support implementing a tax on pop and other sugar-sweetened beverages.

These findings are consistent with the experience of other jurisdictions who found that when government revenue from taxes is reinvested in health, the general public appears to be even more supportive of taxation as a means to encourage healthy lifestyles. A poll in New York found that support for a "soft drink" tax increased from 52% to 72% when respondents were informed that the revenue would be directed to obesity prevention efforts (46).

To ensure the foundation can achieve its full potential in promoting health and preventing disease, the funding model selected must protect the wellness foundation and its' funding from the increasing financial pressures of the acute care system in Alberta (47). This investment must also be separate from, and not at the expense of, existing government budgets for health promotion.

Arms-length to government

The wellness foundation must operate at arms-length to government to maintain accountability and transparency. The foundation should be governed by an independent board comprised of key stakeholders that are selected by an all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly. To help ensure independent and transparent governance and operations, the foundation must be created by an Act of the Legislative Assembly and should report directly to the Assembly each year.

Primary prevention focus

The foundation should support strategies initiatives that are focused exclusively on primary prevention for the greatest impact. Primary prevention refers to actions taken to avoid or remove the root cause of a health problem before it arises (48). In contrast, secondary and tertiary prevention includes screening, rehabilitation, primary care and other forms of follow-up. By exclusively focusing on primary prevention, the foundation will maximize its potential impact to promote the physical, mental and social health of Albertans.

Major modifiable risk factors

The main causes (risk factors) for chronic disease in Alberta and around the world are well-understood (49). The good news is that many of the major risk factors are modifiable and can be changed. The foundation should focus on evidence-based strategies to address six major modifiable risk factors for chronic disease including physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, tobacco use, alcohol misuse, adverse childhood experiences and injury.

Recognizing the social determinants of health

It is well established that the major determinants of health are beyond the scope of the healthcare system (e.g., housing, employment, education) (42, 50). The wellness foundation will work strategically to set priorities that will be effective in achieving health outcomes in Alberta by influencing the social determinants of health (30). The foundation must recognize the influence of these determinants in order to meet its full potential in improving population health.

Promote health equality and equity

Many chronic diseases and other risk factors for poor physical, social and mental health affect certain groups of Albertans more than others. This inequality or difference in the health outcomes for these different groups is often linked to their experience of the social determinants of health (including social, economic or environmental disadvantages) and how it impacts on their access to resources they need to stay healthy (51). Albertans who have experienced barriers to good health as a result of their race or ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, age, mental health, disability, sexual orientation or identify, location and other factors often have poorer health compared to others in our province (51). To ensure foundation activities are effective in reducing health inequalities and promoting health equity, the foundation will ensure a focus on both universal and targeted programs and interventions (52, 53). Interventions will follow best practices and integrate universal approaches with targeted strategies for populations who are most vulnerable or have special needs and barriers to wellness (52, 53).

Independent of the healthcare system

The wellness foundation must function independently of the acute care system in order to maintain financial autonomy and sustainability (47). The financial pressures on the Alberta healthcare system will continue to rise as the result of increased treatment demands and various cost-drivers. Previous efforts to increase spending on health promotion and disease prevention in Alberta have been impaired by increasing financial pressures on the healthcare system. Despite the 2002 Premier Councils' (Mazankowski report) insistence that the Government must increase its investment in prevention, Alberta has taken very little action to adopt this recommendation and increased spending on acute care in Alberta has continued to supersede increased prevention funding (54, 55).

Focus on evidence-based interventions

The wellness foundation must support evidence-based interventions for disease prevention that utilize best practices and promising practices. The evidence base for effective health promotion and disease prevention continues to build and this knowledge must be applied. However the focus on evidence should not impede innovation, especially where knowledge gaps exist.

The wellness foundation should facilitate collaboration across a range of government departments, NGOs and other community-based organizations with potential impact on health. Through the provision of multi-year funding grants, a foundation should support community action by providing resources to support the 'scale-up and spread out' of evidence-based programs, policies and other interventions (advocacy, health sponsorship of events, etc.) proven to promote health. Leading education and awareness campaigns,

evaluating, monitoring and integrating outcomes from initiatives, and providing training and skill development to encourage and support healthy public policy development in Alberta should also be key functions of a wellness foundation.

Multi-year funding grants

The foundation should provide funding grants for interventions that are at least three years in length to allow adequate time for population impact and sufficient evaluation. The funding system should encourage partnerships and intersectoral collaboration for optimal results. Grants should be available to all not-for-profit and governmental organizations, including First Nations communities on reserves. A project's potential for changing the broader social, economic and physical environments to better promote physical, mental and social health, and its anticipated impact on disease burden and cost benefits should be taken into account. Proposals should be adjudicated objectively on the basis of relative merit by an independent expert review panel to prevent the potential for bias.

The need for accountability and transparency

To be effective and sustainable, the foundation must be accountable and transparent. This can be achieved by the following measures:

- Mandatory micro and macro level evaluation to ensure that best and promising practices are being followed, objectives are attained, and results are achieved.
- The creation of a rigorous research and surveillance strategy to capture projected changes in health outcomes resulting from Foundation activities.
- Regular reporting of evaluation and surveillance results with adequate dissemination methods to ensure that the results will add to the global knowledge base for effective chronic disease prevention.
- Reporting annually to the Legislative Assembly and the public to ensure optimal integral collaboration between government and non-government stakeholders.

Conclusion

Wellness Alberta urges the Government of Alberta to take action to develop a dedicated, well-financed and sustainable wellness foundation in Alberta. A foundation developed according to the principles recommended above, will mobilize government, health and community stakeholders to decrease the burden from chronic disease and disability for our families, communities and our health care system. Keeping future generations of Albertans physically and mentally healthy and free from disease is essential to achieving a high quality of life and realizing the Alberta Government's goal of becoming the best health system in Canada (56). *It's about health. It's about time.*

For more information about the evidence-based strategies a Foundation would lead and the success of this model in other jurisdictions, please visit our website www.wellnessalberta.ca

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