

'Tis the season to remember those who need our care and support

The holidays are a season of giving, a time when many of us give more broadly through charitable donations or give of our time through service to charitable causes. But for nearly 1 million British Columbians, giving has become a central part of their daily lives. These individuals—family caregivers—provide unpaid care to family members or friends with chronic health needs, illnesses, or disabilities. And while they are an integral part of our health care system, they often go unrecognized and unnoticed.

As physicians who provide skilled and compassionate care, we recognize that caregiving can be stressful at the best of times. Many family caregivers are thrust into the role suddenly due to the illness or accident of a loved one, and subsequently are ill-prepared for such responsibilities—responsibilities that can lead to burnout that results in their own physical and mental distress. Others may gradually take on increasing responsibility.

What might not be as easy to recognize, however, is who of our patients may be family caregivers or who may be receiving care from a family caregiver. To help physicians better identify and support these individuals, Doctors of BC has developed a physician tool kit that provides practical suggestions on how to identify family caregivers, how we can make efforts to monitor their health, and how we can involve them appropriately in patient care.

The tool kit accompanies our recently released Doctors of BC policy paper, *Circle of Care: Supporting Family Caregivers in BC*, which includes a number of commitments and recommendations that offer a health care planning and delivery approach for recognizing, incorporating, and

supporting caregivers as recognized partners in care. As well as providing practical resources for physicians, the paper solidifies our commitment to work with government and key stakeholders to develop a strategy and establish principles that formally recognize family caregivers and consider their needs in health and social service planning. You can find the policy paper and tool kit on our website at www.doctorsobc.ca.

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Research shows that, in Canada, family caregivers provide an estimated 70% to 75% of care to people receiving home care. That translates to roughly 8 million Canadians actively providing care as a family caregiver on any given day. In BC there are approximately 1 million people filling this role, most of whom are caring for a senior, and with BC's aging population we expect the prevalence of family caregivers to increase significantly in coming years.

It's important to note that family caregivers don't just help those for whom they care; they provide valuable services to the health care system. Patients who are cared for in their homes are more content and free up scarce hospital beds and spaces in long-term facilities, thereby saving the health care system money and resources. But the stress of providing this care can be overwhelming to many. Statistics show that close to one-third of family caregivers in BC are in distress—financially, physically, and emotionally. We need to address this head on. If we don't, we risk completely burning out family

caregivers and, in turn, negatively impacting the people they care for and generating additional pressures on our health care system.

As frontline care providers for patients with chronic illness and disabilities, we are well positioned to identify family caregivers and support them so they can support their loved ones. By acknowledging and including these individuals as recognized partners in care, we have the opportunity to meaningfully impact their caregiving experience. Studies show that when physicians take time to listen and attend to their needs and opinions, caregivers experience less depression. And healthier family caregivers who are recognized and supported for their contributions as partners in care can positively impact the health outcomes of our patients and their own loved ones. It's a win for all.

During this season of giving and reflection, I encourage you to consider which of your patients may be serving as caregivers, and which may be receiving care from loved ones, friends, or neighbors. You are well positioned to share a page from the resource pad included with this issue of the *BC Medical Journal*. This simple, caring gesture may significantly impact the lives of your community members. I am a great believer in the strength of community and the leadership role that we as medical professionals play in our communities. Embrace this privilege.

And however you and your loved ones celebrate this upcoming season, I offer thoughts of warm wishes and a safe season, from the Ruddiman family to you and yours!

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