

Our aging population: A national seniors strategy is needed

Right now 820 000 seniors live in BC—that's 17% of our population or roughly one in every six British Columbians. In just 15 short years that number will escalate to 1.35 million seniors—nearly one-quarter of BC's population. The steep incline of this trend means we're doing a great job of prolonging life, but one of our greatest challenges will be to ensure our health care system can meet the growing needs and demands of our aging population.

As young as we may be or feel, seniors care is an issue we will all face at some point, whether it be caring for an ailing relative or needing care ourselves. Making sure seniors have access to the right health care and to community supports is very important to me, both on a professional level and a personal one. As a physician with a largely geriatric-based practice, many of my patients struggle with issues affecting their ability to access long-term and palliative care. Personally, I experienced firsthand the lack of a national seniors strategy when dealing with my ailing father. I watched a frail old man confined to the ICU because bed shortages prevented him from being moved to an appropriate ward. I also watched a health care system pay a huge premium to keep him in a place where more harm than good could come from his ongoing confinement. And while this experience happened overseas, we face these same issues daily in hospitals throughout BC and across Canada.

Action is needed to address the challenges of providing health care to seniors. It's encouraging that health ministers who participated in the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers of Health Conference held in Vancouver this January recognized the need for improved home care for

seniors and improvements to palliative care. I look forward to a commitment from the federal government for longer-term funding as this will lead to an all-encompassing seniors plan that addresses the challenges now and in the coming decades.

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The Canadian Medical Association is challenging the federal government to develop such a strategy. The Demand a Plan campaign, highlighting the need to make seniors care a political issue, is one of the CMA's most successful advocacy efforts to date. And it's not surprising why. Seniors are Canada's fastest growing demographic, just as they are in BC. It's pretty amazing to think that over the next 5 years estimates suggest there will be more seniors in Canada than children under the age of 14.

Because we need to be prepared now, a number of Doctors of BC initiatives are underway in the province. At the grassroots level many of the divisions of family practice are focusing on seniors care, ensuring that the elderly in our communities have access to primary care, that their residential care issues are being

addressed, and that they're taking the right dosage of the right medications. An example of this is Kelowna's Mobile Assessment Unit, which addresses seniors primary care by linking seniors with family doctors. Another is the team of health care professionals in Chilliwack who have partnered to make it easier for seniors to get focused care.

More widespread are a number of successful Joint Collaborative Committees initiatives that began as prototypes in one or two communities and have expanded to seniors across the province. The Residential Care Initiative enables physicians to develop local solutions and provide patients consistent, standardized, and proactive care in residential care facilities. The Polypharmacy Risk Reduction Initiative supports family and specialist physicians to reduce polypharmacy risks in elderly patients, especially the frail elderly, who are on multiple medications that could impact their safety and quality of life. The Hip Fracture Redesign Project, developed by surgeons themselves, focuses on increasing the positive outcomes for patients who suffer a hip fracture.

These grassroots and provincial initiatives are just a few examples of the work BC is undertaking to address the care needs of seniors. But we need to do more—we need to be coordinated, we need to be comprehensive, and we need a national plan. Our aging population is going to continue growing at an accelerated rate, provincially and nationally. And, like you, I would be comforted to know that should I need to rely on our health care system in my elderly years, the proper care and supports will be in place.

**—Charles Webb, MBChB
Doctors of BC President**