

Executive Summary

The Primary Care Psychologist (PCPsych) Program

Working in integrated teams with multiple specialized healthcare providers has increasingly become a cornerstone of medical treatment. Whereas different disciplines used to be siloed, modern healthcare is more integrated, team-based, comprehensive, and patient-centred.

The B.C. government has done a commendable job creating an infrastructure in which these kinds of patient-care systems can thrive. For example, the development of the

Primary Care Network program in 2017 was a significant step forward in helping improve the health and well-being of British Columbians. Primary care is the central hub where the vast majority of British Columbians go for most of their health-related problems, whether physical, mental, or behavioural. Fortifying this system allows British Columbians to address their problems early, before needing to go to urgent, emergency, or specialty care. Providing team-based care in the primary care system increases the quality and effectiveness of that system and also creates more equitable access to services.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 'diseases of despair' such as suicide and overdose have become central in the discussions of the welfare of British Columbians. Since March, 2020, 2092 people have died from COVID-19 in British Columbia. In that same time period 2600 people have died from suicide and overdose. Trends in healthcare data also show that chronic disease is a huge driver of unwellness in our population. In B.C., we have universal access to high quality medical care. Yet, rates of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease are still incredibly high. The actions that we take to change our health such as improvements in exercise, diet, sleep, and taking our medications are what we call 'behavioural health' and fall under the umbrella of chronic disease management in the healthcare system.

When rates of physical and mental unwellness are high and increasing, as they are now, it takes an enormous emotional toll on our overburdened healthcare workers and an equally great financial toll on our healthcare system and economy. This is why primary care is so important: by targeting the service that British Columbians use first, we can use healthcare dollars much more effectively. By intervening upstream, we save money downstream both in healthcare and in our economy overall.

Psychologists are experts in behavioural health management as well as mental health treatment. With over 3,000 hours of graduate level classes, training, and research, psychologists are skilled in clinical work (assessment, diagnosis, treatment) as well as program development, supervision of other allied health professionals, and program evaluation. Moreover, as regulated health professionals under the Health Professions Act, we have minimum standards of training, must maintain continuing education and assessment, and are accountable to the public through our independent regulatory body.

In order to better address the issues outlined above in an evidence-based way, the B.C. Psychological Association (BCPA) and the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus (UBCO) are proposing the Primary Care Psychologist (PCPsych) program. The PCPsych program relies on over two decades of research demonstrating the effectiveness and cost-savings of having Psychologists working side-by-side with family doctors. It also capitalizes on the knowledge, infrastructure, and training abilities of UBCO's Clinical Psychology program. This proposal requests that the government work in partnership with UBCO to hire, train, and embed 20 full time equivalent (FTE) Psychologists within the Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in our province over the next 3 years.

PCPsychs will be an integrated part of the care team providing care to patients with complex medical, mental and behavioural health needs. This includes direct, on-demand (often same-day) patient consultations for brief (15-30 minute) visits for a wide range of issues including chronic medical condition management, diagnostic assessments, and mental health treatment. These brief treatments have been vigorously studied and outcomes consistently include high levels of patient and physician satisfaction, a decrease in mental health symptoms, improvement in physical health indicators (e.g., diet, exercise), and lower healthcare utilization.

The PCPsychs will be able to implement and evaluate programs within the PCNs and monitor outcomes to assess whether patients are receiving optimal mental and behavioural health treatment. The robust training PCPsychs have in clinical supervision, including supervision of regulated and non-regulated health professionals, is an additional key advantage.

In September 2021, BCPA presented to the 2022 Select Standing Committee on Finances and Government Services regarding a request for dedicated funding to integrate Psychologists into Primary Care Networks. Subsequently, at the request of several Members of the Legislative Assembly, including Sonia Furstenau, Harwinder Sandhu, Janet Routledge, Renee Merrifield, Henry Yao, Gary Begg, Trevor Halford, and the Honorable David Eby, Attorney General, the BCPA submitted a 17 page proposal to the government detailing the PCPsych Program on November 23, 2021; the proposal requested that the 2022 Budget include dedicated funding to initiate and implement the PCPsych program. The BC government's next budget is expected to be tabled in April of 2022.



Okanagan Campus

