



Mapping the future of primary healthcare research in Canada: A report to the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation

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*To view the full report (available this summer) please go to the
Priority Research Themes page at www.chsrf.ca and follow the link
to Primary Healthcare.*



Canadian Health Services Research **Foundation**
Fondation canadienne de la recherche sur les services de santé

OVERVIEW

Canada is embarking on widespread reform to the organization and delivery of its primary healthcare system. These reforms come at a time when there is increasing awareness of the link between quality primary healthcare and important health outcomes. The resulting focus upon primary healthcare brings with it a need to ensure primary healthcare research capacity: the research skills and infrastructure required to answer the core questions confronting policy makers, system managers, healthcare providers and the public.

To evaluate Canada's primary healthcare research capacity, the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF) commissioned this study. Data were collected through a literature review and consultation with practitioners, researchers, policy makers and other experts from both Canada and abroad. We found widespread deficiencies in the sustainability and co-ordination of Canadian primary healthcare research. This research has had little visibility with Canada's main federal health research funder, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). While there has sometimes been considerable support for primary healthcare capacity at the provincial level, such capacity has often been tied to specific, time-limited initiatives. At an individual level, young clinicians and PhD scientists receive little encouragement to pursue primary healthcare research careers. Those who do make a start have major problems securing mid-career support. Although the recent Primary Health Care Transition Fund led to the emergence of quality research teams investigating primary healthcare issues, many of these teams dissolved following the fund's termination in March 2006.

Much of this situation could be traced back to the lack of dedicated funding support provided by national or provincial funding bodies for primary healthcare research and career development.

Canada's approach to primary healthcare research contrasts with that found overseas. Many western nations, in particular the U.K. and Australia, are beginning to reap the benefits of co-ordinated strategies designed to nurture primary healthcare research capacity. Many of these strategies mirror current Canadian initiatives to develop research capacity in nursing.

Canada needs to reinvigorate its primary healthcare research sector through a co-ordinated strategy involving two core initiatives. These are:

- 1) formation of a **Canadian co-ordinating body** for primary healthcare research, whose functions would include a **primary healthcare research information** system to build on the current information dissemination activities of the Foundation and of several provincial health research bodies; and
- 2) **targeted federal and provincial initiatives to fund primary healthcare research**. For maximum impact these should aim to provide **operating grants** directed at critical questions; **team grants** to allow experienced researchers to collaborate and address strategically important primary healthcare issues; support for **primary healthcare research chairs**; and, most importantly, **a co-ordinated program to foster sustainable careers for primary healthcare clinician researchers and research scientists**.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canada is engaging in widespread reform of the organization and delivery of its primary healthcare services. Provinces have begun to experiment with and/or implement major changes in the delivery of primary healthcare, many of which require primary healthcare practitioners to reconsider long-established methods of delivering services, prioritizing care, and interacting with the community. These changes necessitate primary healthcare research and evaluation that can inform decision-making by policy makers, health system managers, practitioners and members of the community.

This report examines Canada's capacity to generate and make good use of evidence emanating from a complex and dynamic primary healthcare system. It results from a commissioned research project funded by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF) and conducted between February and November 2006. A steering committee consisting of respected primary healthcare researchers and a senior primary healthcare policy maker helped guide the project.

The project had four key aims:

- 1) to identify the existing research capacity in the field of primary healthcare;
- 2) to examine how well this capacity is being used to create and communicate policy-relevant research in primary healthcare;
- 3) to assess the likely impact of the end of the Primary Health Care Transition Fund in March 2006 on primary healthcare research capacity and output; and

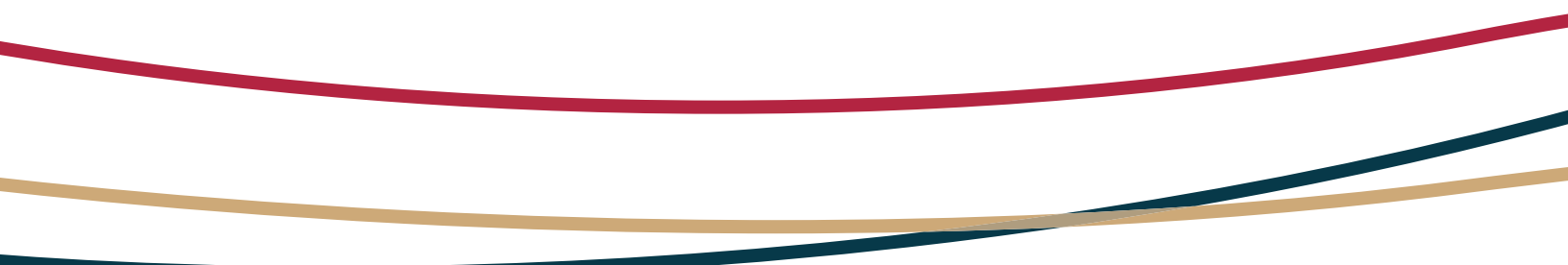
- 4) to examine strategies (including potential funding mechanisms and organizational models) for developing, supporting and enhancing policy-relevant research capacity and knowledge transfer activities in primary healthcare.

Information was collected through a literature review and interviews with researchers and policy makers in Canada and abroad. Preliminary findings were presented and further refined at regional meetings of primary healthcare researchers and decision makers held in Western, Central and Atlantic Canada.

Findings

Research capacity-building was seen as being dependent on a complex configuration of individual, organizational and institutional factors. Research outputs were considered in terms of knowledge generation and knowledge transfer and exchange. Findings suggested a substantial disconnect between the support for primary healthcare renewal and that provided for primary healthcare research in Canada. While there was clear evidence Canada is continuing to be a leader in knowledge transfer and exchange, there was a concerning lack of support for primary healthcare knowledge generation.

Many of these problems could be traced back to the lack of dedicated funding support for primary healthcare research and career development. This research has had little visibility within the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Canada's main federal health research funder.



While there has sometimes been considerable support for primary healthcare capacity at the provincial level, that capacity has usually been tied to specific, time-limited initiatives. There was little indication that co-ordinated resources could be mobilized to address primary healthcare issues that crossed provincial borders.

At an individual level, researcher needs differ depending on whether or not individuals have a clinical background. Clinician investigators have little support to pursue research training, while research scientists have major problems securing mid-career support. Established primary healthcare researchers are often isolated in their own organizations or in their area/region. Few have close links with policy makers and many are challenged by the requirements of knowledge transfer and exchange.

High-quality knowledge generation is further hampered by poor co-ordination of research efforts, limited availability of primary healthcare-related health services data, and problems with researcher access to the data that are available. While some professional organizations have agitated for greater primary healthcare research support, governments, universities and key professional bodies have not been able to generate a common vision for primary healthcare. As a result, Canadian primary healthcare never speaks with a common voice.

The findings indicate the lack of capacity for generating primary healthcare research may compromise Canada's ability to achieve meaningful primary healthcare reform. Overseas experience shows nations with a strong primary care orientation can implement multifaceted strategies to strengthen the capacity for the primary healthcare sector to conduct high-quality,

policy-relevant health services and clinical research. Co-ordinated initiatives have involved established funding for contextually relevant primary healthcare research, sustainable high-quality research training for both clinician investigators and research scientists, and assured, long-term support for practice-based research networks¹.

Recommendations

This report contains specific recommendations designed to map the early steps in a strategy to strengthen the primary healthcare research community in Canada. They call for the development of a co-ordinating agency, a research information system, a strategic funding program, and a tailored approach to knowledge translation.

a) A Canadian co-ordinating body for primary healthcare research

This central recommendation addresses the fragmented nature of the Canadian primary healthcare research community. It seeks a broadly representative body with interests including both clinical and health services research performed in the primary healthcare context. The co-ordinating body would provide leadership, advocacy and policy representation in the area of primary healthcare research and knowledge translation. It would need to work in close conjunction with government, professional organizations and academic bodies to secure stable funding to help advance Canada's primary healthcare research agenda. The co-ordinating body could be hosted or sponsored by an existing federal agency. CIHR or the Foundation could fill such a role, either alone or in partnership.

It is further recommended the co-ordinating body facilitate the development of a pan-Canadian primary healthcare research strategy, establish a primary healthcare research information system, co-ordinate Canada's practice-based research networks, advocate for improved data quality and access, champion appropriate academic recognition of knowledge translation activities, and organize an annual primary healthcare research conference. The research information system, modeled on overseas initiatives, would build on the current information dissemination activities of the Foundation and of several provincial health research bodies. A core activity would be to develop and maintain an inventory of active primary healthcare researchers and primary healthcare projects.

b) Targeted federal and provincial primary healthcare research funding initiatives for primary healthcare-specific operating grants, research teams and personnel support

A pan-Canadian research funding initiative could be housed within an existing agency in an organizational framework similar to the Foundation's Nursing Research Fund. Targeted research funding initiatives — federal, provincial or both — could include:

- **operating grants directed at critical primary healthcare questions;**
- **team grants to allow experienced researchers to collaborate to address strategically important primary healthcare issues;**
- **a co-ordinated program to foster sustainable careers for primary healthcare researchers;**
- **PhD research scholarships for primary healthcare clinicians and future research scientists;**
- **postdoctoral awards for research scientists engaged in primary healthcare research;**
- **expansion of clinician scientist award opportunities for primary healthcare clinician investigators;**
- **support for MD/PhD programs oriented towards primary healthcare; and**
- **support for primary healthcare research chairs.**

c) Knowledge translation and exchange activities tailored to the specific needs of primary healthcare clinicians and policy makers.

¹ A practice-based research network is defined as a group of ambulatory practices devoted principally to the primary care of patients, affiliated with each other to investigate questions related to community-based practice.