

Timely Access
to Healthcare in Nova Scotia:
**Improving
Wait Times**
2007-2010 N.S. Strategy


NOVA SCOTIA
Health



Message from the Deputy Minister

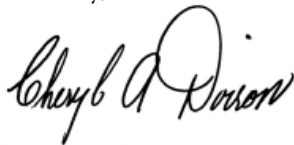
Nova Scotia's Department of Health is dedicated to improving access to health services. We have sought advice on several fronts as we work to keeping our commitments outlined in the 2004 Ten Year Plan. Along with our District Health Authorities and the IWK, we are working together to build a better, more responsive health system...one with better access to healthcare tests, treatments, and services across this province, as close to home as possible.

For the past two years, we have also considered and are now acting on the valuable input of our Wait Times Advisory Committee. The committee members, who include clinical, community and administrative representatives from across the province, have provided us with advice from a unique, front-line and systems lead perspective.

One of their first recommendations was to develop a strategy and I am pleased to say that we have done that. The accompanying document provides an overview of Nova Scotia's approach to managing patient wait times, including a provincial strategy for the next three years.

My sincere thanks to both the committee, its chairman George Cooper, former Member of Parliament who has sat on several health-related boards, and to Neil Roberts, a former CEO of the Halifax Infirmary who has 30 years in hospital management and healthcare consulting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cheryl A. Doiron". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "C".

Cheryl Doiron
Deputy Minister
Health

Introduction

Timely access to healthcare services is a priority for the Nova Scotia Department of Health. To achieve a healthcare system that is able to respond with the right service, by the right provider, at the right time requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Development of a strategy to improve access to services will help to guide efforts in achieving a service delivery system that strives for excellence in quality and patient safety. Success will take the efforts of all Departmental Branches and delivery service agents, including District Health Authorities (DHAs), the IWK and service delivery professionals.

In February 2003, the Department of Health and Office of Health Promotion (now the Department of Health Promotion and Protection) jointly released a document entitled *Your Health Matters: Working Together Toward Better Care*. The document highlighted the importance of wait time information and outlined government plans to monitor wait times and improve access in selected areas.

Broader than the national focus on cancer and cardiac care, sight restoration, joint replacement and diagnostic imaging, Nova Scotia has increased activity to improve access to programs and services across the continuum of healthcare including, but not limited to, mental health, primary healthcare (collaborative healthcare practices), pain management, chronic disease prevention and management, renal dialysis and Continuing Care. Efforts to improve timely access will need to build on current strategies and activities; improve existing programs and services; implement new processes, programs and services, technological solutions and provincial standards; and, strategically invest in infrastructure and human resources.

Timely access to service is complex and is influenced by the balance between the demand and supply for that service. Reviewing these influencing factors provides additional information in determining the focus of strategies and activities.

Demand

Disease prevalence – the higher the prevalence of a particular disease or condition the greater the demand will be for the services required to diagnose and treat that condition. Support for the technologies and resources required for epidemiologic and other research will enhance the ability of the system to respond to the specific needs of the population. In addition, strategic investment in health promotion, disease prevention, and disease management strategies will reduce the burden of illness in the population and the demand for accessible, quality services.

Physician referral practices – referrals that are not necessary add volume to wait lists and lengthen wait times.

Physicians threshold for performing procedures – physicians individually determine the need for performing a diagnostic test or procedure. A standardized approach to patient assessment will ensure equitable access across the province.

Patient preference – physicians for whom there is a greater demand are likely to have longer wait times. Patients are more likely to endure these longer waits to ensure they see their physician of choice.

Emergency Cases – greater numbers of emergency cases or a decrease in the threshold of what is considered an emergency case, will result in cancellations of elective cases and increase wait times.

Wait times – long wait times can act as a deterrent in seeking a particular service and thereby prevent the wait time from lengthening.

Supply

Human Resources – health human resources are needed to operate and manage facilities, equipment and technology, as well as to provide direct delivery services. Within the context of global competition, recruiting and retaining the appropriate human resources to support the system is an ongoing challenge. Creating the right mix of health human resources is critical in creating an efficient system from the first point of contact through the continuum of care, to discharge, follow-up, and continuing care.

Facilities, Equipment and New Technologies – within the ever-changing world of architecture, engineering and technology, it is an ongoing challenge to provide the most up-to-date facilities, equipment and technology that will provide the highest quality services that contribute to improved health status of the population. Strategically investing in facilities, equipment, and new technology is critical to staying up-to-date with current trends and to improve timely access to quality services that focus on patient care, safety, and outcomes.

Organization – in the complex world of healthcare, a coordinated system of processes, procedures, and practices will facilitate timely access across the system. Creating a seamless transition between and among programs and services will contribute greatly to the quality and safety of service delivery.

Guiding Principles

Evidence-Informed Decision Making

Evidence-informed decision-making is about using research, data analysis, facts, expertise, and the experience and best practices of other jurisdictions to gain a more complete understanding of an issue before making a decision. Strategic actions and decisions will be informed and guided by the evidence.

QUALITY

Nova Scotia's health care system strives to contribute to the best possible health status for the population through the delivery of quality programs and services. Quality health care includes, among other things, effective and efficient processes, safe environments, a patient safety culture, and appropriate service utilization. Timely access activities will impact processes, service utilization, and patient outcomes contributing to improved quality throughout the system.

TRANSPARENCY

To be successful in providing timely access to the right service, by the right provider, at the right time requires the efforts of people throughout the system and in the community. To create an environment that facilitates cooperation, coordination and collaboration requires a high level of transparency throughout the process. Transparency will help to build the trust needed for open discussions and to build a more complete understanding of the issue and possible solutions.

COMPREHENSIVE AND INTEGRATED

Health care is provided through a very large and complex system of services across the continuum from first contact in the primary care sector, to acute care, to continuing and palliative care. Activities to improve timely access will be more successful if they are comprehensive and integrated.

Strategy to Improve Timely Access

Nova Scotia's strategy to improve access to health care services provides a comprehensive, integrated approach that involves a range of stakeholders undertaking various activities across and throughout the healthcare system. An integrated approach will facilitate improved planning at the provincial level in support of services delivered locally. The strategy encompasses all healthcare services across all sectors of the healthcare system.

To focus specific actions, five strategic directions have been described. Each strategic direction is supported by a number of activities.

I. Communication

Communication is critical to supporting timely access to services, including communication with and among health care professionals, with patients, and with the public.

Objectives	Activities
To improve effective communication of wait time information to and between government, practitioners, patients and the public.	<p>Enhance website with accurate data from information systems, programs and services.</p> <p>Expand physician-specific reporting on the secure Doctors Nova Scotia website through mandatory data capture provisions.</p> <p>Pilot a patient portal to communicate with and support patients waiting for service.</p> <p>Develop and release regular progress reports to the public through various media.</p>
To improve understanding of appropriate use of health services.	Develop awareness and educate the public about timely access and their role in improving wait times including appropriate use of emergency resources and the importance of keeping (or canceling) appointments.

II. Capacity

Improvements in access to healthcare services requires more effective and efficient use of current resources as well as investments in people, buildings, equipment and processes that will increase capacity within the system.

Objectives	Activities
To optimize the capacity of existing resources.	<p>Review efficiency of the current system and implement recommendations for improvement.</p> <p>Utilize Industrial Engineering expertise, tools, and techniques to optimize processes, improve efficiency, and streamline patient flow.</p> <p>Develop and implement forecasting models, methods and tools.</p> <p>Develop and introduce strategies to reduce inappropriate and unnecessary utilization.</p> <p>Develop and implement strategies to reduce missed appointments.</p> <p>Monitor services with high demand and long waits to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Develop and implement new funding models that create incentives to increase service volume- Develop contingency plans, such as alternate delivery sites, to address high demand <p>Adopt approaches to enhance operational efficiencies and optimize the use of healthcare providers with highly specialized skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Explore the use of specially trained professionals able to perform some of the tasks currently being performed by specialists.
To increase capacity through strategic investments in human resources and infrastructure (facilities, equipment and technology).	<p>Support ongoing health human resource planning efforts to ensure human resources are available to meet the health care needs of the population now and into the future.</p> <p>Continue to strategically invest in efforts to recruit and retain nursing, physician, and allied health care professionals.</p> <p>Support priority information systems projects that specifically address timely access such as implementation of scheduling systems for ambulatory care, physician software and connectivity, a surgical registry, operating room management software, and emergency department information systems, etc.</p>

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II. Capacity continued...

Objectives

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To create a more effective and efficient health care system composed of existing and new models of care able to respond to local needs

Activities

Support provincial plans, such as the Continuing Care Strategy, to upgrade existing and expand and/or construct new facilities as needed to improve timely access to meet existing and future health care needs.

Invest strategically in the maintenance of existing medical equipment and purchase of new equipment and technologies that will improve the quality of health care.

Introduce additional innovative primary health care models that are coordinated provincially and developed locally.

Implement integrated collaborative models of care:

- Coordinate use of acute care facilities.
- Coordinate case management across the system.
- Integrate assessment services.
- Develop and implement province-wide care plans to support standard practice for care delivery.
- Integrate waitlist management, supporting referrals to programs of care.

III. Access Management

Improvements in the ability to manage access require a provincial approach with standardized policies, procedures, definitions, measures, methods and tools.

Objectives

To improve patient access based on priority and targeted time frames.

Activities

Develop and implement standardized measures, indicators, and triage tools for prioritizing patients to monitor and improve access to services.

Establish target times by priority level for national benchmarks and for other services within the health care system such as specialty consults, diagnostic imaging, surgical services, mental health and addictions.

Establish multi-year targets to meet our obligations under the 10 Year Plan to Strengthen Healthcare.

Create a provincial surgical care committee to plan services, and create policies and procedures to improve access management.

Centralize surgical waitlists to support improved access management at the local level and improved reporting at all levels of the health care enterprise.

Implement an information system to capture data across the province to support monitoring services and a provincially coordinated waitlist management system.

Ensure tools and resources are in place to support data collection, analysis, and reporting on wait times across the healthcare system.

IV. Accountability

The Department of Health, District Health Authorities, and private practitioners have specific roles to play in the delivery of healthcare services and are accountable for the elements that fall within their area of responsibility.

Objectives	Activities
To clarify the accountability for timely access at all levels of the health care system.	<p>Clarify the roles and responsibilities for timely access throughout the health care system.</p> <p>Develop accountability agreements with District Health Authorities that include timely access to services.</p> <p>Incorporate access objectives and activities in the business planning and accountability process.</p> <p>Review effect of current funding methodologies on timely access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Develop and implement alternate methodologies as appropriate. <p>Develop an accountability mechanism for provincially funded educational institutions and/or providers to address the substantive issues identified by the Department of Health and engage in actions to address these issues.</p>

V. Evaluation

Evaluation is an essential component in determining the success of activities aimed at improving timely access while maintaining quality healthcare services. Evaluation should focus on whether progress is being achieved and whether the services and activities were effective in achieving desired outcomes.

Objectives	Activities
To improve the quality of healthcare through monitoring, evaluation, and feedback.	<p>Research timely access improvement activities across jurisdictions.</p> <p>Develop common indicators reflecting timely access.</p> <p>Monitor and evaluate variations in service, outcomes, and utilization of resources.</p> <p>Implement provincial quality framework to ensure continuous quality improvement and patient safety.</p> <p>Create access indicators to support the quality framework.</p>

