

What Does “Primary Health Care” Mean to You?

Primary health care is a term used to describe a system where a patient’s health care needs are attended to by the most appropriately trained individual. This method of health care delivery has been called a “team based approach”. Instead of seeing the doctor for every health concern, other health professionals such as nurse practitioners, pharmacists, dietitians or physiotherapists may be called upon to take care of your concerns.

It is no secret that there is a severe shortage of doctors in Canada. Primary health care is a model which has been used around the world to address this problem, most notably in the United Kingdom. Primary health care teams working together can share much of the load that doctors have traditionally taken on their own. This results in greater access to health care for you and other patients. While there are still many doctors in Canada working on a “fee for service” basis (the doctor gets paid according to how many patients he or she sees), many others have joined primary health care teams where they get paid for the number of patients they have on their “roster”. In other words, doctors and other primary health care members are paid to keep patients “healthy” since they get paid the same amount regardless of how many times a patient needs to visit the health clinic.

There are a number of different “primary care models” in Ontario. The most progressive of these are Family Health Teams (FHT). FHTs provide a wide range of services including health promotion, treatment services, chronic disease management and prevention, rehabilitation and palliative care. Health professionals are available nights and weekends to provide health advice and care so their patients do not have to go to busy hospital emergency departments for non-emergency care. In this way the people who need the most help can be seen. They also help their patients find their way through the other parts of the health care system to receive the best possible care.

As patients we have a role in helping to make the “system” work to its best capability. When we feel we require medical assistance it is important to seek out the most appropriate point of entry into the health care system. For instance, for a cough due to a cold that has been with us for a few days or less we could visit our pharmacist to determine possible self-care approaches instead of going to our doctor or to the emergency department. On the other hand, we should understand signs and symptoms of conditions such as stroke and heart attack that require immediate medical attention. These can be reviewed on the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada website at www.heartandstroke.ca or ask your health care team member for a brochure on these or other topics.

Our health is our responsibility and we are urged to “take charge of our health”. If we are rostered to a primary health care team we should get to know the health care “team members”. An approach to health care that is aimed at keeping us well instead of always “putting out fires” is one that is designed to promote a better quality of life overall. Just as importantly, it is our responsibility as individuals to learn skills and gain confidence in maintaining and managing our health on a daily basis. This can be done by following recommendations around healthy lifestyle and seeking out information from reliable

sources that will help us better manage our health and medical conditions. Simply taking our prescribed medications as directed is an important part of self-management. Studies have shown that many hospital emergency visits could have been prevented if patients had taken their medications as directed. The Ontario Patient Self-Management Network is dedicated to helping patients take control of their health. Their website can be found at http://www.ontpsm.net/self_management.php

So what does primary health care mean to you? It is a tremendous opportunity for improving your ability to access quality care through taking an active role in your health. This includes making the most appropriate choices when seeking care, adopting healthy lifestyles, managing medical conditions in partnership with your health professionals and taking medications as prescribed. In short, you are the most important member of your primary health care team!