

Improving Chronic Pain Management in BC

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Doctors of BC Position

Doctors of BC recommends that the BC Ministry of Health, in collaboration with health authorities and other stakeholders, develop a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy outlining an equitable, comprehensive, and coordinated pain management system designed to support timely access to quality multidisciplinary Chronic Pain services in BC. This Provincial Strategy should include concrete funding and implementation commitments to support successful local, regional, and provincial adoption.

Doctors of BC believes that a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should prioritize the following:

- Development of a collaborative, stepped model of care where Chronic Pain management progresses from low intensity services, such as pain assessment, patient education, allied health support, and primary care, to increasingly multidisciplinary and intensive treatment options for people with high complexity Chronic Pain.
- Improved access to and funding for a continuum of multidisciplinary Chronic Pain assessment and treatment options in local communities.
- Support for professional education on evidence-informed best practices in Chronic Pain management for physicians and other members of multidisciplinary teams.
- Expansion of research capacity and quality improvement measures, processes, and systems to support enhancement of Chronic Pain services.

To support physicians working with patients experiencing Chronic Pain, **Doctors of BC commits to:**

- Supporting improved education on Chronic Pain management throughout medical school, residency training, and the professional career of physicians.
- Continuing to support the work of the General Practice Services Committee, Specialist Services Committee, and Shared Care Committee to scale, spread, and coordinate local quality improvement projects on Chronic Pain management.
- Seeking opportunities to contribute physician perspectives in the development, implementation, and evaluation of a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy.

Background

What is Chronic Pain?

According to the International Association for the Study of Pain, pain is defined as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage”.⁽¹⁾ Whereas Acute Pain is associated with ongoing tissue damage, Chronic Pain is typically

considered to be pain that persists for more than 3-6 months.⁽²⁾

Doctors of BC recognizes that pain occurs on a spectrum and that in many cases, the delineation between Acute and Chronic Pain may not be clear. In addition, Doctors of BC acknowledges the role that effective Acute Pain management can play in preventing or mitigating Chronic Pain. While

recognizing these nuances, the focus of this policy statement is on improving services for people with Chronic Pain.

For the purpose of this policy statement, Chronic Pain does not include persistent pain directly associated with advanced malignancies or the end of life.

Doctors of BC acknowledges that for some patients, Chronic Pain may not be attributable to a discreet or diagnosable medical condition. In these cases, efforts to identify underlying medical conditions should not delay or prevent appropriate treatment for Chronic Pain. For patients with identifiable underlying health conditions, Chronic Pain treatment should be provided in conjunction with (not as a substitute for) timely and appropriate management of underlying conditions.

Note that this policy statement is primarily focused on Chronic Pain management within BC's adult health care system and may not be applicable to pediatric settings.

Prevalence of Chronic Pain

In BC and across Canada, it is estimated that one in five adults experience Chronic Pain and that the prevalence rate increases with age.⁽³⁾ In addition, research indicates that people of lower socioeconomic status, living with mental health conditions, working in certain vocations, and survivors of overwhelming trauma are at an elevated risk of experiencing Chronic Pain.^(4, 5) Conditions commonly associated with Chronic Pain include spine disease, headache disorders, fibromyalgia, neuropathies, and arthritis.^(4, 6)

Impact of Chronic Pain

Individuals with Chronic Pain experience adverse effects on their mental and physical health; work capacity; and their relationships with family, friends, and society.

Economically, the direct cost of Chronic Pain includes the increased utilization of health care services such as frequent physician and emergency department visits.⁽⁷⁻

⁹⁾ In addition to the direct cost, indirect costs include

lower productivity, forgone tax revenue, and increased disability payments.⁽¹⁰⁾

Chronic Pain Services in BC

Pain services may be delivered by family physicians, specialists, nurses, pharmacists, and/or allied health professionals at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. These services may be provided at community-based settings or at facility-based specialized pain clinics or centres.

The availability of pain services varies by community and may depend on the number of local practitioners who have additional training and interest in pain management. In addition, access to specialized care varies considerably across the province and is often constrained by significant wait times. It is estimated that average wait times to access tertiary pain centres in BC is 18 to 24 months.⁽⁵⁾ Access to Chronic Pain services is particularly limited for vulnerable and low income populations, in rural and remote regions, and in Indigenous communities.

Analysis

Towards a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy

Doctors of BC is concerned that people with Chronic Pain have limited access to timely and appropriate pain management options in BC.

Doctors of BC recommends that the BC Ministry of Health, in collaboration with health authorities, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders, develop a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy outlining an equitable, comprehensive, and coordinated pain management system designed to support timely access to quality multidisciplinary Chronic Pain services. This Strategy should include concrete funding and implementation commitments to support successful local, regional, and provincial adoption.

In recent years, a number of jurisdictions within BC have developed strategies related to Chronic Pain. For example, Interior and Northern Health have previously

developed Chronic Pain strategies for their respective regions.^(5, 11) A province-wide strategy can provide support and funding for all health authorities to improve and coordinate their approaches to addressing Chronic Pain. To support meaningful adoption, dedicated funding and implementation commitments are essential.

In Canada, provinces such as Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta have developed various forms of Chronic Pain strategies. For example, the Government of Ontario has committed to providing additional annual funding for multidisciplinary care teams, supporting improved Chronic Pain training for health care providers, and expanding their existing Low Back Pain Strategy.⁽¹²⁾

Internationally, Australia released a National Pain Strategy in 2011. Since 2011, all Australian states and Australian Capital Territory Health (ACT Health) have adopted the recommendations of the National Pain Strategy and have all together allocated more than AUD\$100 million to improve pain services in Australia.⁽¹³⁾

Key Priorities of a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy

Doctors of BC believes that a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should prioritize the following:

Developing a Collaborative, Stepped Model of Care for Chronic Pain Management

The overarching goal of a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should be to develop and implement a collaborative, stepped model of care where Chronic Pain management progresses, as appropriate, from low intensity services, such as pain assessment, patient education, allied health support, and primary care, to increasingly multidisciplinary and intensive treatment options for people with high complexity Chronic Pain. In this model, patients may move from one level of care to another and back again over the course of time depending on their needs. Furthermore, this model of care should also support public education

to raise community and individual awareness of, and decrease stigma around, Chronic Pain.

For this model of care to operate effectively, it is critical to support the development of sufficient Chronic Pain service capacity, consistent referral criteria to facilitate appropriate and timely referrals, and patient information systems that enable different providers to have access to relevant patient information in a timely manner.

Improving Multidisciplinary Chronic Pain Management in Local Communities

In BC, although evidence suggests that the majority of Chronic Pain patients can be effectively managed within community-based primary or secondary services outside the hospital setting,⁽⁵⁾ most Chronic Pain services are currently located in acute health centres. Not only is Chronic Pain management in the community preferred by most patients, it is also comparatively less expensive than specialized interventions within health care facilities.

Moreover, evidence suggests that multidisciplinary care for Chronic Pain can have a positive impact on patient outcomes, particularly for people with high complexity pain.⁽¹⁴⁾ A key priority of a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should be to improve access and funding for multidisciplinary pain management services in local communities. These services include a wide spectrum of activities such as pain assessment, patient education, support for self-management, allied health services, physician or nurse delivered health care, and traditional or culturally specific practices in Indigenous or minority communities.

Ideally, these services should be provided by a health care or appropriately trained provider and be delivered in an ethical, evidence-informed, and coordinated manner.⁽¹⁵⁾ For instance, multidisciplinary pain services may be delivered through Patient Medical Homes where physicians work collaboratively with a team of health professionals to deliver longitudinal, comprehensive, and coordinated patient care.

In BC, access to Chronic Pain services is constrained by particular factors. For many people, access to allied health services is restricted by lack of or limited extended health insurance coverage. A Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should outline commitments to ensure that all people living with Chronic Pain have affordable access to multidisciplinary pain management options.

For physicians, remuneration models should ensure fair compensation for the provision of evidence-informed Chronic Pain services.

Enhancing Professional Education

Enhanced professional education can improve physicians' understanding of Chronic Pain and in turn reduce the likelihood of stigmatization, delayed or inappropriate assessments, and biases in treatments.⁽¹⁶⁾

In BC, there are opportunities to improve knowledge on pain management throughout medical school, residency training, and the professional career of physicians. For example, survey data indicates that pain-related content is limited in pre-licensure medical education curricula at Canada's major universities.⁽¹⁷⁾

Physicians can benefit from education on:

- Evidence-informed practices in pain assessment and treatment – including biomechanical, psychosocial, pharmacological, interventional, rehabilitative, vocational, and holistic approaches or practices.
- The role of other health professionals in Chronic Pain management.
- Culturally safe health care practices in Indigenous or minority communities.

In BC, there are opportunities to build upon existing initiatives. The General Practice Services Committee's Practice Support Program offers physicians a pain management module aimed at enhancing the skills of family physicians to support patients with Chronic Pain.⁽¹⁸⁾ At the local level, Divisions of Family Practice,

the Specialist Services Committee, and the Shared Care Committee fund and administer pain management related projects in a number of local communities. In addition, Pain BC is a not-for-profit organization that supports and advocates for improved education, resources, and services for people suffering with pain.⁽¹⁹⁾

Doctors of BC commits to continuing to support initiatives to promote the scaling, spread, and coordination of local programs; strengthening connections between interested physicians with pain management expertise; and working to enhance collaboration between physicians and other stakeholders in Chronic Pain management.

Supporting Research & Continuous Improvement

Implementing a comprehensive pain management system requires continual evaluation and revision. Broadly speaking, a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy should commit to implementing evaluation and quality improvement in a collaborative and transparent manner, and with meaningful participation from front-line physicians, allied health professionals, and people with Chronic Pain.⁽²⁰⁾

Moreover, to support rigorous research and continuous improvement in pain management, the strategy should outline commitments in three areas:

- Expanding research capacity in Chronic Pain management at the practice, community, and academic level.
- Facilitating the efficient and appropriate collection and dissemination of Chronic Pain related clinical and research data.
- Supporting research and evaluation using outcome measures specific to Chronic Pain. These measures should focus on patients' functional outcomes, patient and provider satisfaction, and long-term cost effectiveness.

Conclusion

One in five British Columbians live with Chronic Pain. Its impact is significant, both on quality of life and as a driver of health care utilization in BC.

Efforts have been made to improve education and services. However, there remains an immediate and considerable need for patients to have timely and affordable access to multidisciplinary care to address the physical, functional, psychological, and social causes and impacts of Chronic Pain.

In order to improve upon the current disparate, and in many cases, insufficient Chronic Pain management resources in BC, Doctors of BC recommends that the BC Ministry of Health, in collaboration with health authorities and other stakeholders, develop a Provincial Chronic Pain Strategy outlining an equitable, comprehensive, and coordinated pain management system designed to support timely access to quality multidisciplinary Chronic Pain services in BC. This Provincial Strategy should include concrete funding and implementation commitments to support successful local, regional, and provincial adoption.

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History

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