

Creating a Healthier Society

RNAO's Challenge to Ontario's Political Parties: Building Medicare's next stage, focusing on prevention

With the release of its comprehensive report *Creating a Healthier Society*, RNAO poses a challenge to all political parties: to adopt policies and programs that will advance a healthier society and a stronger health-care system for all Ontarians.

The platform calls for building the second stage of Medicare by increasing the health-care system's focus on wellness and illness prevention.

RNAO outlines recommendations in five key areas: social determinants of health, the environment and health, Medicare, the nursing workforce, and fiscal capacity. These recommendations are based on overwhelming evidence on what keeps people healthy and what makes us sick.

Keeping us Healthy by Building Medicare's Next Stage

The evidence is irrefutable: differences in social and economic status are directly linked to unequal health outcomes. Poverty, inadequate housing, social exclusion and barriers to health care are among the main social causes of ill health. Registered nurses witness the effects of poverty on health in our day to day practice.

The time for action is now. We live in an affluent province and can no longer ignore the increasing number of men, women and children who are left behind due to poverty. A \$10 minimum wage; protection for vulnerable workers; higher social assistance rates; a community-based housing strategy; concrete steps to support parents and children – these are the actions that will help vulnerable people fight poverty and improve their health.

Nurses also know that the environment is a major determinant of health, and people flourish most when they live in clean, green, liveable environments. We need to change our energy policies to emphasize conservation and to avoid further damage to our planet and to our health. The next provincial government must also take steps to ensure a healthier environment for Ontarians and reduce exposures to pollution, toxins, and harmful chemicals.

Tommy Douglas, the father of Medicare, envisioned that the system's end goal would be keeping people healthy. To achieve this, we must build a robust system of community services to focus on illness prevention and chronic disease management. We must also secure further investments in public health, primary care, home care, and pharmacare. Seamlessly bridging these sectors to hospital care will result in a cohesive vision for health and health care in Ontario.

Caring for Us When We Are Sick

Medicare's next stage does not replace, but rather builds upon what we have today. If we are to achieve a healthier society --- and we nurses say we must -- we need to encourage politicians to master the political will to protect, expand, and strengthen Medicare. As we increase investment in prevention, we must also maintain our publicly funded and not-for-profit delivery of health care, and continue to ensure universal access for all Ontarians.

Registered nurses have a key contribution to make in improving health outcomes and health care. To effectively promote health, prevent illness, assist people with chronic conditions with managing their diseases, and nurse people when they are ill, we must enable adequate numbers of nurses to work to their full potential in all health sectors.

Building a much stronger preventive model -- within the context of an aging nursing workforce -- mandates a range of nursing health human resource strategies. These include: a net increase of 9,000 RNs employed in Ontario by 2010; increasing the share of RNs working full-time to reach the targeted 70 per cent in all sectors; full-time guaranteed for new graduates; implementing the 80/20 strategy for all nurses 55 and older (who will spend 80 per cent of their time on clinical work and the other 20 per cent on mentoring new grads and other professional development activities); and equalizing remuneration and working conditions across all health-care sectors.

These measures will ensure that we are making the best use of nursing knowledge to provide the public with the nursing care they need and deserve.

Maintain and Expand Fiscal Capacity to Keep Ontarians Healthy and to Care for Them When Ill

Implementing these policies will require substantial investment -- from \$4 billion in the first year to \$6.2 billion in the fourth year. However, these costs must be measured against the cost, both human and financial, of inaction. These figures also address drastic funding cuts to social services, housing, and transfers to municipalities over the last decade.