

CARE DEFICIT ASSESSMENT SERIES

The AMA asked some of our physician experts how their patients have been impacted by the COVID-19 care deficit. In this series, physicians share insight from the frontlines and the opportunities they see for improvement

It will take all of us, working together to recover from the care deficit. We hope to generate discussion among physicians, patients and our health system partners to help find a way forward.

ISSUE 1 PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH

The Care Deficit

Children and youth have been seriously affected by pandemic disruption. School is where children develop their identity and sense of self with their peers and many have struggled during lockdowns: in transitioning between at-home and in-school learning; with the loss of or reduced social contact with friends in school and at home; and anxiety about their own safety or about making family members sick. This disruption has also resulted in many children losing access to sport and recreational activities as a means of socialization, physical activity and self-esteem. In addition, children and youth have been affected by the increase in stress and mental health deterioration within their community, school and family system. Structure, social connection, literacy and education at school are important for building resiliency in kids and are social determinants of health with lifelong implications.

Some children have already needed mental health supports, while others newly fall into that category. These challenges have significantly increased the number of children and youth presenting with mental health issues.

Pediatric mental health physicians report poor access to mental health supports in general. Prior to the pandemic, there were challenges in accessing needed supports, with mild-moderate referrals already having limited resources and moderate-severe referrals relying on potential access to multi-disciplinary clinics through child and adolescent mental health programs. The network of support services available in-school and in the community has been disrupted or is now more difficult to access. This includes the Family Supports for Children with Disabilities program funded by the Government of Alberta. Although some improvement is anticipated as COVID-19 wanes and staffing and programming in schools and communities becomes more stable, the significant deficit is likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

Even prior to the pandemic, there was a need for increased basic mental health literacy in our communities, preschools and schools. Children and parents need more information on important factors such as sleep, nutrition, resiliency factors, exercise/play and use of technology. Parents need more information on dealing with learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and other conditions. They also need help in dealing with their own anxiety, stress and depression. These needs have been amplified by the realities of the pandemic.

Many patients have shared the difficulty they have personally experienced when trying to access mental health supports in both child psychiatry as well as general pediatrics. Patients and their families, as well as schools and teachers, report: long delays and difficulty accessing services at all levels, including physicians and pediatricians trained in the area of mental health issues; child and adolescent psychiatrists and counsellors. In some clinics, the pediatric mental health/behavioural waitlist is at least six months long and often far longer. Some clinics have even closed behavioural consultations.

Although many community pediatricians are well-versed in children's mental health, they are not able to provide therapy, which is often the first line treatment recommended for mental health conditions, and they instead focus more on medication management and advocacy. Children with complex mental health needs and their families require wrap-around mental health teams with mental health counselors, mental health nurses, social work and dependable access to psychiatry follow-up. Individual community practitioners are not a long-term solution to this mental health crisis, especially in these complex cases.

Mental health issues often require a team approach and collaboration between service providers. We expect the demand for these types of collaborative mental health services will increase following the pandemic.

Erosion and lack of services in the community results in delayed diagnosis of mental health conditions and increased complications due to prolonged untreated and unrecognized mental illness. There are increasing numbers of visits to emergency departments and hospital admissions of patients with mental health issues, self-harm and eating disorders. Statistics show that pediatric patients admitted for eating disorder issues stay in-hospital for a long time, with the average length of stay for an eating disorder inpatient being 17 days. Very few patients are even accepted into the eating disorder multi-disciplinary clinic and the waitlist is almost one year long.

When it comes to children's mental health, timeliness is critically important as children may age out before having issues addressed. Many families also struggle with the costs of medications for children and the lack of coverage for supports, such as therapists or aids for those that need it most.

The end of mask mandates and cohorting in schools may create additional anxiety for some children. Others may elect to home school, which may prolong their isolation from peers. Students and families should be supported in their choice of whether to continue masking.

Work-Arounds/Temporary Fixes and Solutions

Some pediatric physicians are partnering with Alberta Health Services and trying to innovate and re-envision existing services to address the decreased supply of general pediatricians, developmental pediatricians and child psychiatrists in this province. However, these groups are running into shortfalls due to uncertainty of impending overhead policies in AHS clinic sites, lack of supply of appropriately trained physicians and limitations in current billing codes to capture the time and complexity to serve these children and families with complex mental health and development needs. Better solutions are needed.

Prior to COVID-19, some changes in services for children had already been implemented, including the removal of Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD) from schools. This service provided interventions and supports, including mental health, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech language pathology and psychology to children in the school setting. School based programs are very important as children spend most of their time there, making programs easier to access and creating less pressure for parents. Some programs have been replaced in different forms, but not to the same scale. Program Unit Funding was also reduced, with new, more restrictive criteria to qualify for these early intervention supports. At the same time, rural and regional centres are experiencing a shortage of primary care providers to provide access for patients.

Moving forward, we need to address barriers that make it difficult for seamless support for kids and their families. These barriers included severe lack of publicly funded or affordable child and family therapists; siloed care (AHS community vs. inpatient); difficulties on current fee structure or clinical Alternative Relationship Plans to effectively engage family medicine physicians; regional pediatricians with mental health and developmental skills; and physician supply challenges

(currently there is only one psychiatrist in Medicine Hat and one in Lethbridge). Right now, physicians are doing their best to cover the gaps where it has the greatest impact, but this approach is unsustainable.

What's Needed in the Long Run

Most of these are chronic system issues that are the result of a burdened mental health system prior to COVID-19, now being weighed down by increased demand for mental health supports and the system's inability to keep up. Our front-line physicians told us that solutions could include:

- Improved and equitable access to mental health therapists through the public health care system and throughout both urban and non-urban communities.
- Improved access to child psychiatry throughout the province.
- Addressing the "brain drain" of psychologists moving to private fee-for-service practices.
- Investment in training programs for the existing physician workforce that increase the clinical capacity and clinical scope for treating mental health conditions (e.g., CanREACH).
- Improved accessibility of mental health supports through the school system (i.e., COPE program in Calgary).
- Improved compensation, specifically time modifiers, for virtual mental health visits for family physicians and pediatricians.
- Recruitment of child psychiatrists and general pediatricians to non-urban locations.
- Supporting children in school who choose to continue to mask.
- Investment in infrastructure to support pediatric patients transitioning to adult care.
- Behavioural consultants working directly with pediatricians and teams in community offices (would allow for more regular follow-up/contact required with most pediatric patients).
- Develop a central website to compile resources for physicians for their education and for distribution to families and patients as needed.
- Patient navigators to assist patients/families with wayfinding in the system.
- Improved access to child psychiatry consultation throughout the province, which requires recruitment of, and enabling effective functioning of child psychiatrists, skilled general psychiatrists and general pediatricians particularly within regional (or small urban) locations with rural outreach enabled.

Resources for Patients

Many families with a child who has a learning, behaviour or developmental problem find it hard to know what services to seek.

Here are some resources that we have compiled. Please note that this list is not exhaustive and the AMA is not associated with the delivery of any of these services. The list is provided as assistance to physicians and patients.

- Family Support for Children with Disabilities
 - Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) helps families plan, coordinate and access services to raise a child with disabilities.
 - www.alberta.ca/fscd-resources.aspx
- (New) ALIGN Association of Community Services - Transition to Adulthood Program
 - Starting April 4, government will provide young adults with targeted services they choose based on their goals and dreams for their future, additional supports will be provided, which will focus on supports and services the young adult needs to successfully transition into adulthood.
 - www.alignab.ca/starting-april-4-2022-the-new-alberta-transition-to-adulthood-program-will-provide-young-adults-with-targeted-services/

- ACCESS Open Minds Edmonton (youth 16-25)
 - A national youth mental health network uniting youth, families/caregivers, leading researchers, service providers and decision makers in revolutionizing services and leading ground-breaking research
 - www.accessopenminds.ca
 - Edmonton walk-in clinic embedded within a youth and young adult friendly environment. Individuals and their supports are welcomed and seen by a clinic therapist on a first come, first serve basis.
 - www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1077951&serviceAtFacilityID=1130436
- Inclusion Alberta
 - A family-based, non-profit federation that advocates on behalf of children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families.
 - More than 40 non-profit organizations belong to Inclusion Alberta, main offices located in Edmonton and Calgary with staff in every region of Alberta.
 - www.inclusionalberta.org
- FASD Coaching Families
 - Assists families in their own home as they learn about and respond to the needs of their children who are affected by or are strongly suspected of being affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).
 - www.informalberta.ca/public/service/serviceProfileStyled.do?serviceQueryId=1051706
- ADHD Association of Greater Edmonton
 - A registered charity whose mission is to offer information and support to those living with ADHD in the Greater Edmonton Area. It offers facilitated ADHD support groups for parents, adults, young adults and partners of adults.
 - www.adhdedmonton.com
- ADHD Family & Community Resource Centre
 - Patients, families, health care providers and community members have access to reliable and comprehensive information, resources and supports related to children's health and well-being.
 - www.fcrc.albertahealthservices.ca/health-information/library/information-prescriptions/
- Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta (LDAA)
 - Dedicated to maximizing the potential of people with learning disabilities. The provincial organization focuses its efforts on province-wide initiatives, most specifically representing the learning disabilities community at the provincial level.
 - www.ldalberta.ca/about-ldaa/
- Autism Society of Alberta
 - Provides services and support to people in the community who are living with autism spectrum disorder, connects families, individuals and professionals with autism-related resources.
 - www.autismalberta.ca
- CanReach Program
 - Accredited mini-fellowship in pediatric mental health for primary care providers, based on evidence in pediatric psychiatric medication usage in combination with assessment, engagement and community linkages.
 - www.wp.hmhc.ca
- Addiction and Mental Health – Information for Albertans
 - This site provides important 24/7 numbers, links to numerous programs and services, and resources and tools for Albertans.
 - www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/amh.aspx

- Child Mental Health – Anxiety
 - Dedicated to improving child mental health services in the primary care setting by promoting the use of evidence-based information and the efficient use of evidence-based rating scales in everyday practice.
 - The **Anxiety Canada** website has information and offers access to proven resources for children, youth and families. www.anxietycanada.com
 - The **Teen Mental Health** website has information, resources and tools related to anxiety. www.mentalhealthliteracy.org/mental-disorders/
 - The **Here to Help** website has information and resources related to anxiety. www.heretohelp.bc.ca/anxiety-disorders
- Child Mental Health – Resources
 - For teachers: www.mhlcurriculum.org/ and Shared Care: www.shared-care.ca/

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