

What are the two most important health care issues facing Canadians today?

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One late afternoon, you arrive at the local medical clinic regarding some irregular stomach pain. Assessing the situation, a nurse notifies a doctor and leads you to a vacant bed. You feel cared for as the nurse acknowledges your pain and offers to bring you anything you need while you wait. A few moments later, a doctor comes and prescribes you some antibiotics for your pain. This scenario, taking place prior to any World War, provides a glimpse of the empathetic and timely way the health care system previously operated. Visits to medical clinics nowadays are considerably more stressful due to the fear of being mistreated by medical professionals (Bethune, 2016). Based on my experiences, I believe that the two most significant health care issues we face today are the lack of empathy and communication in the medical staff.

Empathy is an emotion felt by someone who understands the pain of another person (Merriam-Webster, 2022). To provide the utmost quality of care, health care workers must be capable of empathy. Prior to World War I, nurses were simply volunteers from organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross Society; they received no monetary compensation for doing their job other than the profound gratification of helping others in need (GC, 2017). The reason behind pursuing a medical career plays a significant role in the ability of an individual to show empathy and take on additional responsibilities. Considering the amount of time health care

employees spend with patients, genuinely caring for and checking up on them is essential for trust to develop. The lack of empathy expressed by some medical staff towards patients impedes the formation of trust between them. Empathy, in health care, is acknowledging the patient's pain and communicating to them that their health matters.

Growing up, I have witnessed the lack of empathy in the health care system on multiple occasions. A few years ago, while in the waiting room of an emergency ward, I saw another patient nearby who was on the ground, in visible pain. For a long period, I watched as nurses and doctors walked by and disregarded the man on the floor who was writhing in pain. Due to this instance, I realized that empathy may not be as common as we expect it to be.

Over the years, I have made numerous trips to the emergency ward and my experience with the medical staff seems to have been progressively worse. I, among many others, have experienced what it was like being treated like a customer rather than a patient. Due to universal health care in Canada, individuals are able to visit medical institutes when in need of medical attention. However, considering the lack of empathy shown by the medical staff, some patients may have second thoughts about receiving health care. Specifically, there are disparities in the accessibility of healthcare for Indigenous peoples and the general population of Canada (NCCAH, 2019). Indigenous peoples who live in more rural and remote areas may have poorer access to care as well-equipped hospitals are in urban areas (NCCAH, 2019). This geographical disparity results in limited primary and emergency care for some Indigenous communities. A study conducted by Lavoie et al. (2016) found that Indigenous peoples have higher mortality rates compared to others due to the late diagnosis of disease. Additionally, these higher mortality rates could be a result of misdiagnoses which is likely due to racial discrimination displayed by

medical professionals (Wylie & McConkey, 2018). Consequently, this undermines the purpose of universal health care because people are not receiving the medical attention they need.

Communication plays a key role in a modern functioning society. A well-functioning society is formed by engaging in social interaction and through this, sharing and understanding different perspectives. Likewise, the health care system is a society of its own, and therefore, requires communication skills, which is a key feature of the patient-care model (IHC, 2011). Medical clinics prior to World War I had fewer patients because isolation was a common strategy used to control the spread of contagious diseases such as smallpox and influenza, which were prevalent during the time (Tognotti, 2013). Attending to fewer patients allows nurses with plenty of time to communicate with the other staff regarding the patient's health issues, resulting in a shorter stay and increased rate of recovery for the patient (Henriksen, 2008). Additionally, the budget required to run these clinics was minuscule in comparison to today, as healthcare costs continue to rise in response to population growth (Tsasis et al., 2019). Communication is the basis of many medical assessments done by the clinical staff so it is important that the staff are skilled enough to interpret the patient's emotional and physical needs and adjust their practices accordingly.

The issue of communication in our health care system became apparent to me when an unpleasant experience involving my grandpa transpired at the hospital. I believe this experience was due to a lack of communication amongst the medical staff. He went to the hospital to undergo a minor procedure. The nurses assigned to do the procedure were unfamiliar with the process and the doctor was not present in the room. Despite being unprepared for the procedure, they continued to go through with it and performed the procedure incorrectly. During the procedure, my grandpa was screaming in pain and repeatedly insisted that they stop, however,

the nurses continued. Their mistake led to internal bleeding, which put him in a state of constant pain and on bed rest for weeks. If the nurses had communicated to the doctor that they were not certain of how to perform the procedure, their mistakes could have been avoided. The negligence of the nurses, in this instance, was resultant of their inability to communicate with their patient and fellow staff.

Compared to the past, there are many hospitals and medical clinics available to the public therefore, there is a greater need for more well-rounded health care workers in the system. The initiative to introduce prospective well-rounded students with an interest in equitable healthcare starts in undergrad. For example, a Queen's university alumni named Kiowa Bernhardt is a representative for Indigenous health and was throughout her undergrad nursing career. Kiowa insisted that a more culturally safe and anti-racism curriculum would deem profitable in providing this knowledge to prospective health care workers, and as of 2021, the Faculty of Health Sciences at her university has agreed to this integration (Queen's University, 2021).

In addition, healthcare workers have been overwhelmed with increasingly severe health protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These mentally draining conditions along with the responsibility of taking care of multiple patients, has impacted the healthcare workers' ability to show clinical empathy (Anzaldúa et al., 2021).

The lack of empathy and communication in the current health system is becoming very apparent and requires immediate attention (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Failure to deal with these issues is harming the legitimacy of the health care system because with a lack of communication and empathy, patients are less likely to visit the hospital. Thus, future research should focus on how the healthcare system can implement changes to reduce burnout in healthcare workers and

how to structure a better working environment, as these factors impact the ability to empathize and communicate effectively.

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