

## Home Care and Pandemic Flu

A pandemic is a real and serious threat for which all members of society and the health care system must prepare. A pandemic will likely compromise the normal ability of the institutional sector due to overwhelming demand. The home care system will be required to coordinate care for greater numbers of individuals and will need to leverage its capacity.

As part of Ontario's *Plan for an Influenza Pandemic*<sup>1</sup> home care providers will be requested to support vaccination programs, assist with "flu assessment centres" and provide direct care for individuals in their homes. As was the case in the 2003 Ontario SARS outbreak, the home and community care system will need to support more people to avoid unnecessary trips to high-risk institutional environments. Strong linkages and effective communication with primary care and community based organizations is vital to realizing this goal.<sup>2</sup> The Ontario Home Care Association (OHCA) believes that leveraging technology solutions will be an important component of supporting people at home.

Home care service provision is fundamentally dependent on the contribution of family and friends. In the home care system, family and friends play a key role in caring for their loved ones at home during illness and recuperation. This is in part a resource issue, but also a philosophy of care and our societal expectation. As a result, home care providers have a unique collaborative relationship with family caregivers and are skilled at teaching and supporting individuals to learn how to remain safe at home.

Best practice in home care includes the proactive preparation of individuals and their families to cope with the unexpected. As part of care planning and particularly anticipating needs during a pandemic, home care providers will address the following concerns and pre-plan with their clients and their family caregivers:

- *Support issues* - the identification of people to be contacted for assistance – this includes family, friends and formal services.
- *Physical health issues* - teaching and delegating of care tasks to the individual and/or his/her family caregiving network. Family caregiving tasks include medical duties such as wound dressings and injections, delegated by the health care professional; personal care such as bathing, dressing, eating or toileting; support activities such as preparing meals, household management, managing medication or attending to finances, and activities such as coordinating the myriad of services that care receivers may require.
- *Mental health issues* – planning for strategies to address symptoms such as anxiety, depression, isolation that may occur.

This self-management approach to care will be invaluable during a time when system resources will likely be stretched to capacity.

Clearly, any sudden demand for increased service during a pandemic will challenge the human resource capacity of all parts of health care, including the home and community care sector. As during SARS, additional funding to

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health & Long Term Care (2008) Ontario Health Plan for an Influenza Pandemic August 2008

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Home and Community Care Council (2003). SARS and Community Care: Impact and Opportunities

provide care to individuals at home will be necessary. However, recognizing the demand that may be placed on staff, OHCA proposes that innovative technology applications be approved so that those at home can be better connected to the health care team.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence from across Canada shows that technology solutions increase staff efficiency and effectiveness thereby enhancing home care capacity. Innovative technology is an enabler of improving the vital linkages with primary care and community based organizations. Active and passive remote monitoring has been shown to effectively complement the home care practitioner, enabling access to health care when the provider cannot be present in person.<sup>4</sup> Documentation systems enhance the ability for providers to connect and share information in a timely way thereby improving service to the client and decreasing time spent on communication and redundant clerical activities.<sup>5</sup>

Committing to complementary technology applications that enhance access to care in the home and improve human resource use and system utilization should be essential component of an effective contemporary pandemic plan. The added benefit to the home care system infrastructure and to the ability for home care to support its vulnerable clients and the families who care for them, today, make this well worth the investment.

Home is where most Ontarians of all ages want to be to recuperate from an illness, manage a long term care condition or live out final days of life. The health care system in Ontario is transforming to enable care at home and in the community wherever safely possible. A key component of providing care in the community today and in the future will be the use of new technologies that leverage the capacity of our precious health human resources and enable clients and their families to access the health team. OHCA recommends that technology be approved as a means of responsibly supporting the home care sector today and responding to the need that will arise during a pandemic.

## About the OHCA

The Ontario Home Care Association (OHCA), *the voice of home care in Ontario*, is an organization of home health and social care service providers. Association members deliver nursing care, home support services, personal care, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social work, dietetics, speech language therapy and medical equipment and supplies in the home. Ontario Home Care Association members are contracted by all three levels of government, Community Care Access Centres, insurance companies, institutions, corporations and private individuals. OHCA members are accredited by Accreditation Canada and/or the International Standards Association (ISO).

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For the latest in news and information about the home care sector in Ontario, subscribe to the Ontario Home Care Association's "House Call" at [www.homecareontario.ca](http://www.homecareontario.ca).

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<sup>3</sup> Currently in Ontario, government funded home care services are typically provided as an in-person visit

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Home Care Association (2008) Integration through Information Communication Technology for Home Care in Canada Final Report

<sup>5</sup> Ibid