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Fred Horne, MLA
Edmonton-Rutherford
Government of Alberta

Dear Mr. Horne

Alberta Gerontological Nurses' Associations (AGNA) central purpose is to bring together nurses who are interested in gerontology and whose intent is to improve the health, wellness and quality of life of older adults. Our mission is to provide leadership in promoting excellence in gerontological nursing in Alberta, and our objectives include advocating, fostering, and participating in activities which promote the health and quality of life of older adults in Alberta; and the presentation of the views of AGNA to government, educational, professional and other appropriate bodies. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit AGNA's views in regard to a new Alberta Health Act.

We will answer your questions as they were presented in your letter.

1. What are your organization's views on the appropriateness of the overarching principles proposed for the Alberta Health Act? Are there additional principles you would propose?

Put people and their families at the centre of their health care.

AGNA strongly supports this principle. It is important that families of the elderly be included in their health care. Decisions must be made by the senior whenever possible but families need to be included in order to provide support to the senior.

The principles in the new Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act are an excellent basis for decision making regarding older adults.

Be committed to quality and safety.

AGNA supports this principle and the use of the Health Quality Matrix. In order to ensure quality and safety in the provision of care, and minimize risk to older adults, adequate staffing must be available. This could be accomplished through the development of standards for staffing which match required professional levels to the care needs of older adults. Funding to meet standards of staffing and education of staff must be available to enable standards to be met.

Ensure equitable access to timely and appropriate care.

This is an important issue for older adults. Access for older adults includes access to health care services but also includes other important aspects. Older adults need access to community based support services (such as housekeeping, home maintenance, foot care, respite for caregivers) that will enable them to continue to live successfully in the community. Another example, transportation is very important as many older adults are no longer able to drive and, in rural areas, do not have access to appropriate transportation services. Staying connected to social and recreational opportunities is a key component of health for the older adult. Increasing access to these supports in the community may lessen the need for institutional care.

AGNA recommends that this principle be amended to include affordability, as many seniors are challenged to pay for pharmaceuticals, immunizations, transportation, and living expenses. It is important that seniors not be forced to make a choice of paying for living expenses over paying for needed medications.

Enable decision-making using the best available evidence.

AGNA is committed to utilizing the best available evidence in the provision of care to older adults. This value implies a support for research that will provide the evidence and AGNA strongly supports this. The principles of knowledge translation need to be incorporated into decision making processes to ensure that health care practices change to reflect new evidence. For clinical practice to change it is also essential that all health care providers have access to education and ongoing learning opportunities which requires funding so that they can be aware of best practices and be able to implement these practices into their care for seniors.

Be focused on wellness and public health.

This essential principle needs to be the first one articulated. The concept of healthy aging needs to be introduced as early as possible in society and incentives need to be in place to make it easier to do the right thing / health behaviour to minimize or mitigate preventable health issues. In order for this principle to be effective, the social determinants of health must be incorporated and prevention and treatment supports need to be well-funded and made accessible, available and appropriate within the senior's community. Effective collaboration between government ministries and agencies is essential.

Foster a culture of trust and respect.

This is an important principle; it is essential to foster a culture of trust and respect within our health care system. Constant change in the system creates uncertainty and mistrust and adds unnecessary challenges to resources and users.

Currently the elderly are vulnerable to the stigma of ageism. There is a risk that this will put older adults in the position of being blamed for the situation and potentially disrespected.

2. What are your organization's views about rights, responsibilities and other components that should be included in the Alberta patient charter?

AGNA supports the inclusion of the elements listed. We would suggest the inclusion of the concept of affordability to the elements in the charter.

We would suggest that the term "patient" be changed as the term patient implies that the individual is ill. It is not in keeping with the principle of putting people and their families at the centre of health care and the principle of wellness and public health reviewed earlier. We would recommend that the charter be called "Health Charter for Albertans".

3. Please provide your views as desired on the other components of the Alberta Health Act.

AGNA would agree that the Act should consolidate the many Acts now governing health care and incorporate the services currently not covered by any Act. We would suggest that the Act cannot be so broad as to leave all specifics to regulations. The needs of seniors for different care at different times must be respected; e.g. the needs of a senior in an acute care hospital are different from the needs of the senior in facilities now covered by the Nursing Home Act. It is important that the provisions in current legislation, such as the Nursing Home Act, not be lost in more general provisions in a new Act.

4. Going forward, how should the public, health professionals and other stakeholders be consulted in the development and review of future legislation, regulation and policy?

AGNA believes that it is important that all changes in legislation, regulations, and major policies be open to public discussion and consultation. The consultation process should be included in the Act so that it is mandatory. The process should be transparent, and allow adequate time for responses. Proposed decisions should be supported by best evidence and research. Information should be disseminated through multiple forms such as open forums, mass media, the internet, and communication to associations, organizations, regulatory colleges, researchers, educators and other interested parties. Responses should be solicited through on-line surveys and questionnaires, as well as through public meetings. Communication of information and availability of opportunities for responses must take into account the methods of communication used by vulnerable individuals, such as the frail elderly.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the views of AGNA. We look forward to the results of your consultations.

Sincerely

Lisa LeBlanc

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President
Alberta Gerontological Nurses' Association