



**FREDERICTON  
CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE**  
— The Voice of Business —

364 York Street, Suite 200  
Fredericton, NB  
E3B 3P7



May 2021

Hon. Dorothy Shephard, Minister of Health  
HSBC Place  
P. O. Box 5100  
Fredericton, NB  
E3B 5G8

Via email: [dorothy.shephard@gnb.ca](mailto:dorothy.shephard@gnb.ca)

**Re: New Brunswick Health Reform**

Dear Minister Shephard:

I am writing today on behalf of the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce and our 1,000+ members in response to the Province's ongoing health reform consultations. Thank you for engaging New Brunswickers over the past few months to take a close look on the current state of our health system and plan for the future. Our organization has gained some experience with the system since the launch of our former "President's Committee on Physician Recruitment" in 2009 and I will share our key observations since that time.

An Aging Population

The province's population is aging and has been nearly stagnant over the past decade – although there have been small signs of optimism recently. This presents both funding and care issues as (on average), the vast majority of health care required comes in the last 5-10 years of life and the same time as people are leaving the workforce – limiting the province's ability to generate the revenue needed to pay for the care that people need and deserve.

Top economist Richard Saillant, in his book *A Tale of Two Countries*, argues (amongst other things) that in order to meet the Canada's goals of providing equivalent health care throughout the country, federal health transfers should be weighted to reflect an older population – currently the formula is primarily based on a straight per-capita basis. While we agree with his assessment, an increase in federal transfers is not something we can (or should) count on. Our aim should be to make the most efficient system that produces the best health outcomes within current expected funding levels – even this will require more economic growth than we've seen since the 2008 recession. In short – we cannot afford to get this wrong or take implement more band-aids to the system.

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### A Business Issue

Physician recruitment first came onto our radar as we started to hear from members that they were having trouble attracting employees to the province as often the first question the recruit would ask was *how do I get a doctor*, which eventually became *can I get a doctor?* As we became more involved in the health sector it became clearer to us that what we should be asking is *can I access primary care?* And answering this question has become the basis of our health care advocacy.

In fact, accessing primary health care returned to our annual policy priorities list for 2021 as the number of individuals in the Fredericton area without a family doctor and/or other easy access to care has never been higher since our committee launched more than a decade ago. Since then, the chamber has added events to welcome new medical residents to the city, an annual physician appreciation event and a practice management training series that provides medical residents with ‘business basics’ information in advance of opening a private practice.

We believe that helping young medical residents and physicians make connections in the community will help them choose Fredericton to base their practice. Assisting them as they become small business owners makes it more likely they will stay for the long term. Young physicians receive scant business training during their studies and our members have been generous in providing workshops, seminars and professional development opportunities. Access to primary health care is a community problem and takes a community solution.

Family doctors are obviously still critical to effective health care, but the current solo-practice physician model can no longer form the basis of primary care - the emphasis should be on accessing primary care more generally. Not only is this a more efficient use of limited resources but getting people into primary care faster also produces better health outcomes. Our advocacy has correspondingly shifted over time to focus on the Access-to-Primary-Care Model rather than the family-doctor-only model.

### Access to Primary Care

The future of primary care must involve family health teams, community care clinics, nurse practitioners and allied health. Not only are these models more efficient but they provide better access for patients, leading to better primary care and as the discussion paper states – new physicians also want this model as it provides a better work-life balance for them. Some physicians and the New Brunswick Medical Society have begun to move in this direction, forming Family Health Teams that provided better access for patients and better balance for physicians.



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Fredericton's Downtown Community Health Centre was also a big step forward. Horizon Health's 2012 Community Health Needs Assessments recommended similar clinics throughout the province - these are even more needed a decade later. Getting those built should be a priority. We need to start thinking differently about health care in New Brunswick.

The strain on the people that provide care was great prior to COVID-19 and has been exacerbated exponentially over the past year and half. To highlight a couple of alarming stats, more than 15,000 people in the Fredericton Region (and 44,000 provincially) are currently without a family doctor and therefore mainly rely on after-hours clinics and emergency rooms. Just this month, it was reported that there are currently more than 700 vacant nursing positions across the province.

#### Conclusion

With consultations ending, the hard work begins on making tough decisions and implementing changes. While there may not be widespread agreement on what reform should look like, it seems everyone agrees that change is needed and the system in its current form is not sustainable – the pandemic has brought this into even sharper focus than before.

New Brunswick has done remarkably well managing the pandemic and we should all be thankful for that as it seems that even relatively minor outbreaks of COVID-19 put immense stress on the health system that at some point it will not be able to handle. This is primarily due to pre-existing challenges that the pandemic has underscored and made top-of-mind for many.

Sincerely,

Krista Ross, CEO  
Fredericton Chamber of Commerce