

# AT ISSUE HEALTH AND LANGUAGE



## Challenge: Respond to Pressing Needs

**Fact:** Access to French-language services in Alberta is severely limited; in most areas, they are non-existent. Yet, health needs are evident in all segments of the French-speaking population, most pressing in both young and old as well as cultural communities.

Unlike other medical technologies, there has been little or no health care investment in the French language, even though it is the most essential “technology” in providing care to Alberta’s French-speaking population. This has a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of care, access and the security of patients, for instance:

- Increased number of diagnostic tests and errors;
- Cases of misunderstood diagnosis or treatment;
- Lack of follow-up on treatments;
- Higher health care costs.

Research also shows that language barriers are at the root cause of the variance often observed between the state of health of the majority population and that of the linguistic minority population.

*“Language has been described as medicine’s most essential technology—its principal instrument for conducting its work. It has been observed that without language, the work of a physician and veterinarian would be nearly identical.”*

**Sarah Bowen, B.A., M.Sc.**

**Language Barriers in Access to Health Care, Health Canada, Nov. 2001**

## Solution: Provide Targeted Programming

Effective communication between physician and patient has a positive impact in many respects, e.g., shorter visits, better use of emergency services, improved quality of care, satisfaction and health outcomes. That makes it everyone’s business.

### Role of Government

In 2012, Alberta Health Services adopted a patient-centered care framework and action plan, a key document that identifies Francophones as vulnerable, thus a priority population for targeted chronic disease prevention and management, primary and community care programming. The time for implementation is now.

### Role of Health Care Professionals

Physicians and other health care professionals who speak French should engage Francophone patients in their language whenever possible. The benefits of doing so are well documented and include:

- More accurate evaluation of health needs;
- Fewer medical errors;
- Better understanding;
- Greater compliance with treatment.

### Role of Patients

By the same token, Francophones should be encouraged to voice their need for French-language health care, all the more so in Alberta’s health system where the focus is overwhelmingly on providing patient-centered care.

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