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**essentiel!**

Membre de la francophonie 

## A review of Alberta Health Services

### Executive Summary

The Réseau santé albertain, RSA (Alberta Francophone Health Network) is grateful for this opportunity to participate and to contribute to this review of AHS and to provide our input on reducing the costs of health care delivery in Alberta.

We begin with the premise that *“an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”*. By helping Albertans live a healthier lifestyle we can reduce costs associated with meeting the needs of people who are not well or who suffer from diseases that are preventable.

Also, numerous studies have clearly indicated that language and culture are important determinants of good health. Communications between a health professional and a patient/client must be clearly understood by both parties if positive results are to be expected.

The systematic collection of the language variable through Alberta Health Services' Connect Care (new provincial clinical information system) would go a long way in providing evidence-based planning and decision-making. Also, a web portal where health service providers submit information on the services they offer in French and in other languages would provide additional information on available resources and where to find them.

As with all health services provided by clinics, health centers, long-term care, emergency services and others, French-language health services must also be centred on the needs of patients and their families, focused on results, and integrated into the existing service delivery model. The offer of such services needs **to be visible** and promoted in a proactive way and available on a permanent basis. Patients presenting at intake/reception should be asked about preferred language.

**Active offer** is particularly relevant in a context where people don't know:

- Which establishment can offer health services in French?
- What services are offered in French and where to find them?
- Where to find health professionals who speak French?

Many Francophones would never dare ask for services in French, especially in the health care system, because they fear the consequences this could potentially have on their treatment as a patient. Immigrants who do not speak English will find it difficult to ask for services in French simply because they do not know how to ask or where to go for services in French.

**Obviously delayed health care often leads to complications which eventually increases risks to the health of the client and increased costs to the system.**

## Health services adapted to the linguistic and cultural needs of clients lead to better results and lower costs

Communications that are easily understood between health professionals and patients lead to a more precise evaluation of the patient's health. There is a better understanding of the needs, the diagnosis and the treatment leading to a lower risk of error. There will also be a greater compliance to treatment leading to a better health outcome overall.

When communications are uncertain, health professionals request more tests if only to reassure themselves that they are not missing anything and are making the right diagnosis. There is a considerable increase in costs when this occurs. Where medications are concerned, patients are at a greater risk of taking medications improperly and suffering adverse events.

Yet we have in our health care system in Alberta access to fluently bilingual health care professionals, of many if not all disciplines, doctors, nurses, specialists, health care aids, etc., who would be able and willing to provide their services in languages other than English.

The Alberta Medical Association identifies on its web site the profile of its members indicating languages spoken. For example, both Calgary and Edmonton have over 300 doctors each representing many specialties, who speak both English and French. Some speak a third language. Everywhere in Alberta, where francophone communities exist, we can find bilingual health care professionals who are willing and able to offer their services in both French and English.

However, identifying other professionals, such as nurses, is more difficult as the professional associations do not make this information available. Unfortunately, AHS does not keep track of the languages of their employees. Providing incentives to encourage AHS and these professionals to make their linguistic capabilities known could lead to a considerable asset and a long list of professionals with abilities to respond to the needs of different cultures and linguistic communities. Providing this kind of support to health teams in clinics, PCN's, hospitals would contribute greatly to **reducing costs in providing health services that are centred and focused on the client's and their family's needs.**

In Alberta, according to the most recent census of 2016, there was an increase of 22% of people whose mother tongue is French. There are over 88,000 francophones in Alberta, 50% of which come from elsewhere in Canada and 24% from other countries, mostly from African countries whose official language is French. Immigrants and refugees do not speak English upon their arrival in Alberta. However, their health needs are immediate and cannot wait for them to learn English.

Edmonton has the highest concentration of Francophones with 39% of the total or 34,000. Calgary has 33% or 29,000 people. Other important concentrations are found in the North West part of Alberta, including the Grande Prairie and Peace River area as well as the North-East including Fort McMurray and Bonnyville, St-Paul, Lac la Biche and Plamondon. Francophone schools have opened in many towns in Southern Alberta such as Brooks, Airdrie, Okotoks, Canmore, Cochrane, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat attesting to the presence of a considerable francophone population.

In all of these areas, we know that a significant number of health professionals speak French fluently. In McLennan, for example the hospital has over 127 health care professionals providing health care services to a large area of nine francophone communities. Over 40 of these professionals are fluently bilingual providing services in French and English.

In Alberta, 184,000 students from kindergarten to Grade 12 are enrolled in French-language, French immersion or French second language programs. Over 141,500 students are enrolled in core French and over 42,400 are enrolled in French Immersion programs. There are 42 French-language schools in Alberta with over 7,800 francophone students. Campus St-Jean has over 800 students enrolled in 9 undergraduate programs, including a bilingual 4-year Bachelor of Nursing program.

With the introduction of Connect Care, AHS will be able to provide the best possible information throughout the care journey, including the 'preferred' language of the patient. This collection of the language variable will allow for better communications between health care professionals and patients in the delivery of quality health services.

The Canadian Health Workforce Network has analyzed the extent to which the professional associations and regulatory bodies for seven health professions in each province are capturing the required data on French-language services. These initiatives, together with knowledge mobilization and networking, form the foundation for the National Strategy on Linguistic Data.

The Réseau santé albertain, RSA (Alberta's Francophone Health Network) is presently compiling a list of bilingual health professionals in Alberta, including doctors and nurses and other professionals with different specialties such as psychologists, dentists, etc. Our purpose is to help francophone communities obtain access to French-language services where it is important to do so.

For example, we are working with Alberta Health Services and representatives of the Army base on the Northern outskirts of Edmonton. This base has a large francophone contingent. Fully 25% of the Edmonton base (over 1,000) is composed of Francophones from Québec. Because the base is a federal responsibility, there is a clinic (newly constructed and recently opened) to provide health services to military personnel. However, the families of the military do not have access to these services. They must obtain services in the city. Many of these people do not speak nor understand English very well and require services in French. We have identified a bilingual doctor who would be available to provide services in French to the families, parents and children, at the entrance of the military base. We are now at the stage of identifying a space for such a clinic which could actually offer services to the families in both official languages, thereby meeting the needs of all military families.

This, of course, brings us back to reducing costs by providing services that would lower the risk of errors and reduce the need of extra testing to minimize the risk of a missed diagnosis. It would also increase the understanding of the treatment recommended and lead to better health outcomes overall.

## **The Active Offer of French-language health services can only succeed if we make it everybody's business. It requires commitment, acceptance of responsibility and ongoing collaboration among all stakeholders**

**At the Government level:** The Alberta government has adopted a French Policy which states in part: *"... the government is committed to enhancing services in French to support the vitality of the Francophonie in Alberta in a targeted and sustainable manner as resources allow."*

**Health Care Administrators:** Given their responsibility to ensure the provision of quality services, administrators can take steps to create a positive environment for an Active Offer of health services for Francophones where it would be good to do so. They can do this by adopting policies, procedures and practices as well as by recruiting and hiring linguistically competent health care professionals. AHS is implementing an electronic patient record system which should make it possible to identify preferred languages for patients as well as for health professionals.

**Health Care Professionals:** In clinics and other health care settings such as Primary Care Networks (PCN) and community health centers, health care professionals can provide leadership simply by acknowledging their ability and willingness to speak French.

**Post-Secondary Educational Institutions:** These institutions play a key role in preparing new generations of health care professionals to better understand the linguistic and cultural needs of patients and provide ever more responsive patient-centred care.

(We are presently working with Faculties of Medicine and English language post-secondary training programs to identify Francophone and Francophile students, to accompany them around learning activities in French and support them in their efforts to become bilingual health professionals.)

**Francophone Organizations:** The Francophone communities will include health care as a priority in the respective action plans of their organizations. Many already work with RSA to support initiatives seeking to develop access to French-language health services.

**Francophone population:** Active Offer involves both health care providers and patients. Asking for health services in French demonstrates the need. Community representatives must also be engaged in health care planning and be part of the governance of organizations responsible for providing health care services.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1) The preferred language of the client/patient be recorded on the Connect-Care system so that health care professionals can quickly respond to the needs of the patient.
- 2) Create a web portal to allow health service providers to submit information on the services they offer in French and in other languages.
- 3) Clearly identify what services are offered in French and where these services are available throughout Alberta.
- 4) Provide incentives to encourage health care professionals to make known their linguistic capabilities so that AHS can better respond to the needs of the patient.
- 5) Actively offer French-language services to the francophone communities in order to better meet the growing demand in areas of Alberta where it is important to do so.
- 6) Pro-actively offer health services to meet the particular and immediate needs of Francophone immigrant communities in Alberta.
- 7) Create a Francophone Provincial Consultative Committee to work with AHS to provide recommendations and cost-effective solutions to provide quality health services to francophone communities in Alberta.

Better communications between health care professionals and patients lead to a better understanding of the needs of the patient, a more precise diagnosis, a lower risk of error and greater compliance to treatment which in turn reduces the costs associated with the overall quality of health care.

The Réseau santé albertain is available to work with AHS to explore ideas and recommendations to enhance access to quality health services in order to respond to the needs of other communities.