

ISSUES & IDEAS

Integrated cancer care is a promising answer to rising costs

BY DR. HAL GUNN

British Columbia's health care system is in crisis. Rising costs due to demographic factors and rapidly rising treatment costs, coupled with falling government revenues from the current recession, have prompted the province's Health Minister Kevin Falcon to declare a "war on the status quo" and to state, "we have to think about how to do things better."

Cancer treatment costs in particular are soaring. Cancer is a major cause of premature death in Canada and is rapidly overtaking heart disease as the country's leading killer. Statistics Canada estimates that there will be 171,000 new cases of cancer and 75,000 deaths from cancer in 2009. Meanwhile, the cost of drugs to treat Canadians with cancer can reach \$50,000 per treatment course, placing great strains on the public purse.

In B.C., from 2002 to 2007, the

government faced a 60-per-cent increase in the cost of drugs. The cost of cancer drugs increased annually by 27 per cent. One of the major reasons drug costs are escalating is that only about five per cent of potential new drugs make it into clinical practice after an investment of more than \$800 million.

But there is a way to reduce cancer costs, both financially and in terms of patients' quality of life. It is called Integrated Cancer Care.

Integrated cancer care encourages patients to become more proactive about their health and healing by using simple, evidence-based lifestyle approaches such as healthy nutrition, exercise, stress reduction, supplements and emotional support to complement conventional cancer treatments. While chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery address the disease, an integrated approach assists patients to recover quickly, improve their quality of life, and helps prevent cancer recurrence. The result: Future



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Dr. Hal Gunn, CEO of InspireHealth, with Angela Warburton doing some acupuncture on Chantal Jolly at the Centre for Integrated Healing.

treatment costs are reduced, potentially saving the system significant health care dollars.

The cancer-care community is viewing this approach as an idea whose time has come. Doctors and oncologists are discussing integrated oncology and integrating wellness and cancer care. The June 22 issue of *Time* magazine highlighted new models of health care and reported on a number of successful integrated programs.

Integrated care is cost-effective — the addition of this broader integrated approach is a small fraction of the cost of conventional cancer treatment. Integrated care improves quality of life, reduces recurrence, improves survival rates and reduces the number of costly second and third-line chemotherapy drugs given as a last-ditch effort for incurable cancer. The cost of integrated cancer care,

such as InspireHealth's program, is less than \$2,000 for each new cancer patient.

Integrated cancer care improves patients' quality of life and survival rates and saves health care dollars. B.C.'s over-extended health care budget is facing a potential collapse. It comprises about 46 per cent of the total provincial budget and, in just 10 years, the ministry of health estimates that the figure will balloon to 77 per cent.

Research shows that the future of cancer care must include an integrated approach. A recent study revealed that a majority of cancer patients fail to meet minimum standards on diet, exercise and lifestyle changes — all things that would reduce their risk of cancer recurrence. Only five per cent of cancer survivors meet the minimum recommendations regarding the three most important recommendations for a healthful lifestyle: healthy diet, exercise and not smoking.

With the growing body of medical evidence supporting integrated care and prevention-and-wellness approaches to health, it is time to respond to the evidence that integrated care is part of the solution to our health-care crisis.

Given the financial strain of the health-care system, governments must take a closer look at prevention and integrated care models that focus on health and the underlying causes of disease. B.C. patients opting for an integrated approach to their cancer care are demonstrating leadership. It is time for our decision-makers to do the same.

Dr. Hal Gunn is the chief executive officer and co-founder of InspireHealth, a Vancouver-based integrated cancer-care centre. He is also co-winner of the 2009 Dr. Rogers Prize, which is awarded annually to those who are making a significant contribution to the field of complementary and alternative medicine in Canada.