

The *Politicization* of the Wait Times Issue – and How to Rise Above It

Waiting times for essential medical services remains a top concern for Canadians across the country. In every province and territory, patients wait for too long, causing anxiety, economic hardship, needless pain and suffering, and perhaps even unnecessary deaths.

Provincial and federal governments of every stripe have acknowledged the problem. Doctors, other healthcare professionals, hospital administrators, policy experts, Ministry of Health officials, and politicians have all joined the chorus. There is unusual unanimity when it comes to the definition of the problem and in the conviction that we must do better.

So what have we accomplished?

Well, plenty. Medical professional groups, including the Wait Time Alliance (WTA) and others, have invested considerable time, expertise, and resources in the development of medically acceptable wait time benchmarks. These benchmarks are now published and accessible to anyone who wants to use them or refer to them.

We've also had the Romanow and Kirby Reports. We've had the *Ten Year Plan to Strengthen Health Care*. We've had the *Final Report of the Federal Advisor on Wait Times*. We've had the former prime minister, Paul Martin, vow to "fix health care for a generation". We have had the current government move toward the promise of "wait time guarantees", including the announcement last week of an agreement between the federal government and the provinces/territories to commit to providing guarantees for one of the five so-called "priority areas" (cancer, cardiac, diagnostic imaging, joint replacement, and sight restoration). We've had money poured into the effort – hundreds of millions – even billions - of dollars.

Yet, the ultimate goal remains elusive. Patients, providers and payers remain underwhelmed by the efforts and accomplishments to date. Complaints about wait times continue unabated amongst patients and family members.

Where to begin as we evaluate ourselves?

Well, first, its important to recognize that there are no villains here. Everyone wants to do the right thing.....and make no mistake, positive steps have been taken. Progress has been made. No one is being obstructive. No one wants to see us fail.

The problem is simply this: the issue has become *politicized*. There are too many soundbites. Too many early, easy and manufactured victories. An abundance of

unrealistic expectations. And, most importantly, no sense of collective responsibility or accountability.

In the rush to see progress, we have all gravitated to the easy answers. We have claimed progress and success in areas where there never was a problem. We have undersold and set aside the most difficult tasks. And we have laid blame at others' feet.

The reality, of course, is that this issue is not something that can be fixed overnight. Furthermore, no one person or group has the ability or resources to address this adequately or comprehensively. The solution has to come as the result of a massive effort from all stakeholders in the context of a profound cultural shift toward collective responsibility and accountability. Everyone has to believe that this is important, and everyone has to be committed to making a change. It is patently ridiculous to blame failures on the government. Does anyone really believe that politicians in Ottawa, or Regina, or Fredericton, or Victoria, or Quebec City, can fix this? It isn't up to them. It's up to all of us - doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, social workers, technologists, hospital managers, directors, and administrators, bureaucrats, politicians, and the public at large. This problem belongs to all of us, and the solution must come from all of us, through an exercise in collective responsibility and accountability. We all have an important role to play. And we can only do it together.

To move forward, we need to de-politicize the wait times issue. To do this, we need to buy in to some basic concepts:

1. We need to accept and believe that "instant success" is not possible. We need to believe that the current challenge is a *process challenge*. We need to fix the way we think about things and the way we do things. This will not result in instantaneous results. And that has to be OK. If we do not plan properly we will never design the systems or train the health professionals that we need now and into the future.
2. We need to reject the *politics of component care*. We need to stop thinking of waiting times as a set of single numbers. The wait time is fundamentally the continuum of the *patient experience* – from first symptom, to family doctor visit, to specialist consultation, to specialized testing, to surgery, procedure or treatment, to rehabilitation, to recovery. It is a *patient journey* through a cascade of diagnostic and therapeutic events that leads to a conclusion. Each component is as important as the others; and the sum total of these parts, with all their complex interactions and interdependencies, is the outcome of interest. Shortening a surgical waiting time would be meaningless, for example, if, in order to accomplish this, longer waits to see the specialist in the first place was the consequence.

3. We need to capitalize on the rare unanimity we have currently amongst health care stakeholders, politicians, and patients. Moments in history where everyone agrees on the facts are rare. Yet we are at such a point in the wait times issue. Let's not squander all this good will and enthusiasm on cheap political points. We know what has to be done – let's just get on with it.

The health care system in Canada is a rich tapestry of intricately related components. We must embrace this inter-relatedness as a strength, not a liability. By conceptualizing the wait times problem as a *patient care continuum* issue that necessarily draws from multiple components and dimensions, we can begin to create a cloak of considerable durability. The competitive, political (and ultimately destructive) view of the issue to date has only encouraged the creation of isolated solutions to small pieces of the puzzle – parallel threads that cannot withstand the test of time because they compete with rather than compliment each other.

Need clarification and motivation? It's easy. All you need to do is to remember one thing: it's not about doctors, or nurses, or hospitals, or politicians, or taxpayers, or money, or winners and losers.

It's about patients.

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