

## Special

## SUSTAINABLE HEALTH CARE

## Conference Board fostering debate on sustainable health care

**A**ccording to the National Health Expenditure Trends report released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information in early November, health care spending in Canada will exceed \$200 billion in 2011.

Between 1999 and 2009, Canadian public sector health care spending increased by an average of 7.4 per cent, far outpacing our GDP. Health care consumes more than 40 per cent of some provincial budgets.

With an aging population, growing rates of obesity and chronic disease, and rising health care costs, experts argue that it is time for a new approach.

The Canadian Alliance for Sustainable Health Care (CASHC), recently launched by The Conference Board of Canada, aims to lay the foundation for that shift by “deepening the debate about what sustainability means for our health care system,” says Conference Board chief economist Glen Hodgson.

The alliance, currently comprised of 29 private- and public-sector organizations, including five provincial representatives (ministries or health authorities) and two of Canada’s leading hospitals, will facilitate open dialogue regarding health care research and its implications, with a view to improving the Canadian health system as a whole.

Beginning with a survey of the existing research, CASHC is examining the linkages between the current state of population health and the economic impacts of chronic disease. “There is an economic consequence to rising obesity rates, for example. Increasing obesity results in rising diabetes prevalence, which affects the ability to stay in the labour force, and consumes more health care resources,” says Mr. Hodgson.

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**Paul Lucas,**  
President and CEO,  
GlaxoSmithKline Inc.

“Population health is a big systemic issue for the country.”

The alliance also aims to identify the most effective ways of evaluating the performance of the health care system. “Various organizations have developed their own scorecards, but it is important to broaden that conversation, including multiple sectors, to ensure that we all have confidence in the methodology. Before we talk about results, we must be sure we’re measuring the right things.”

Each project will draw on the expertise of Conference Board employees trained as RNs, MDs and health economists as well as CASHC members, who will serve as adviser groups.

That kind of multidisciplinary, team-based focus on outcomes is critical to achieving better health and fostering sustainability, says Paul Lucas, former chair of Canada’s Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (Rx&D) and president and CEO of GlaxoSmithKline Inc.

The traditional focus of policy leaders and health care professionals has been on cost containment within the silos of health care such as the cost of physicians, nurses, hospitals and drugs. That approach has been a barrier to health care innovation and improved productivity, he argues. “With the rigorous focus on cross-containment in the silos, we’ve generated some unintended consequences, which increase costs.”

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Conference Board of Canada chief economist Glen Hodgson says the board launched the Canadian Alliance for Sustainable Health Care as a means of “deepening the debate about what sustainability means for our health care system.” The alliance is comprised of 29 private- and public-sector organizations. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

the money available.

“There are some basic process management approaches that can be used to improve productivity,” says Mr. Lucas.

One Ontario cancer centre, for example, engaged productivity and process management experts from Toyota to redesign their backlogged patient care process. As a result, patients are happier because the time they must spend at the centre has been reduced, and they feel they are being treated well. The centre has achieved improved throughput and productivity.

In other communities where similarly innovative approaches

have been tested, the results include better patient outcomes and satisfaction, improved throughput in hospitals and reductions in emergency room visits.

But a comprehensive shift in focus requires the efforts of all sectors, notes Mr. Lucas. “Public demand is essential, but because the public isn’t well organized, business and industry leadership is key.”

The sustainability of the Canadian health care system is a critical issue for industry, he cautions. “In private organizations, health care issues lead to productivity reductions, absenteeism, and short- and long-term disability.”

“We have to start this dialogue and find solutions, because if we don’t, the system will fail us going forward. It is innovation that will enable us to make the health care system affordable,” says Mr. Lucas.

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