

Patient-oriented research a key to better service

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The Maritime SPOR Support Unit initiative is focusing on patient-centred health research outcomes in the region in order to enhance health care. (ADRIEN VECZAN/Staff)

The majority of patients who require health care in the Maritime provinces receive the care they need.

However, the complex scenario of an aging population and rising health-care costs are leading to growing concern about our ability to retain a high-performance health care system.

Even today, pressing issues in the delivery of health services abound: underuse, overuse and misuse of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, unpredictable and long waiting times, fragmented care and unanswered questions about the value of society's investment in health care.

Led by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Strategy for Patient Oriented Research (SPOR) is a coalition of federal, provincial, territorial and other partners established to focus on these issues.

Funded as part of the SPOR initiative, the Maritime Strategy for Patient Oriented Research Unit (Maritime SPOR Support Unit, MSSU) is dedicated to integrating research into health care.

Our mission is to lead the development and application of patient-centred outcomes research in the region, with a vision of enhancing the health and well-being of individuals and populations in the Maritimes.

Since May 2013, the MSSU has taken shape with the active participation of the governments of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, health authorities in all three provinces, the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick Health Research Foundations, at least five universities, patient groups and other concerned citizens.

There are inevitable trade-offs among quality, access, and value of health care, with one dimension of this iron triangle emphasized at the cost of another.

The MSSU is helping shed light on those trade-offs by engaging patients and eliciting their values and priorities at all stages of research, including defining health research questions, participating in study teams, interpreting results, and eventually helping design improvements.

A major focus of the MSSU is integrating Maritime health-care data and streamlining ethical and secure access to the data. While health data are already being used to inform health-care policy and decision-making at the provincial level in all three provinces, the MSSU seeks to develop a regional approach to research, using these data for informing policy and decisions.

For example, MSSU researchers are examining patterns of service utilization for patients undergoing complex joint-replacement and heart surgery in Nova Scotia as well as for those who travel to a neighbouring province. It is our hope that the outcomes of this project will improve the service and experience of patients awaiting these crucial procedures.

In addition to hosting research, the MSSU provides consulting expertise in key areas related to patient-centred outcomes research, including knowledge translation, evidence synthesis, ethics and data confidentiality, and patient engagement. We also offer a special focus on training a new generation of health researchers and those supporting the field.

Never has the need been greater for evidence-informed decision- and policy-making. This MSSU fosters Maritime-wide co-operation in patient-centred outcomes research, which, in turn, offers the best hope for addressing the pressing challenges facing the health-care system.

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David Anderson is chairman of the Nova Scotia MSSU provincial advisory committee, a professor and former head of the department of medicine at Dalhousie University, district chief in the Nova Scotia Health Authority, and will become dean of the Dalhousie faculty of medicine on July 1. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Maritime SPOR Support Unit.

