



northern health

Northern Health's Community Consultation Response

This is what Northern BC residents told us.
So this is what we're going to do...

April 2005

Summary

Northern Health conducted its first community consultation process in 2004. Through community discussion sessions held across Northern BC and written submissions through a consultation workbook, participants offered a great deal of feedback on the health services/approaches that could benefit Northern British Columbians. There were also many suggestions on how Northern Health could adapt its services and operations to better serve the people of Northern BC.

Some of the major themes that appeared during the consultation and the actions Northern Health will take to address them include the following:

- 1. Promoting good health and preventing health problems** - Participants see improved overall health for Northern British Columbians through efforts to promote healthy living and prevent injuries/health issues.

Northern Health will work to increase preventive health care budgets, emphasize tobacco reduction to reduce this major cause of preventable illness, and seek ways to reduce motor vehicle crash related injury and death. NH will work with community organizations and health providers to put these steps into action.

- 2. Making sure services remain available locally** - Participants want the health system to be available for them when they need it.

Northern Health will continue to budget more hospital beds than the provincial average, given that our overall health is not as good as that of other British Columbians. NH will also provide access to emergency and diagnostic procedures within provincial guidelines, make sure key specialty services (such as obstetrics, pediatrics, general surgery, orthopedic surgery, internal medicine, and psychiatry) are available in all three Health Service Delivery Areas, and provide appropriate levels of services for seniors based on population needs.

- 3. Improving access to health care services** - Participants want to see improved access to health services and procedures.

Northern Health will take a number of steps to accomplish this. A new travel assistance service will provide ground transportation between Northern BC communities for people requiring health services, lower cost airfares back to the home communities of patients who have been air medivaced on short notice to southern BC for care, and reduced cost accommodations for patients who have to leave their home community for medical treatment reasons and need an overnight hotel/motel stay. Planning of the program is now underway for implementation later this year.

Northern Health will also enhance telemedicine services to conduct health consultations through a video-link, reducing travel for appointments or procedures in some circumstances.

While Northern Health is not the main funding agency for Aboriginal health services, NH can provide services/supports that better link programs together to benefit Aboriginal people in our region. Northern Health can also make certain that our health planning and services take into account the unique health needs of Aboriginal people.

- 4. Funding of health services** - Northern Health realizes that health care costs continue to rise. While there must be fiscal discipline, investments have to be made to build an effective health care organization for the people of Northern BC.

Northern Health will ensure its services are provided on an on-going basis within annually-balanced budgets, make sure resources are distributed equitably through all parts of the region based on factual evidence, provide capital plans to replace aging health facilities and equipment, and manage health services with cost-effective administration levels.

- 5. Strategic direction** - Northern British Columbians want a blueprint for how Northern Health will provide health services in the region.

Using feedback from the consultation process along with direction from our Board and Executive Team, Northern Health will develop a Strategic Plan to guide the organization over the next several years. NH will make this plan publicly available in the near future.

- 6. Advocacy for health in Northern BC** - The people we consulted with want us to do more to ensure that we advocate for their health needs.

As part of our upcoming strategic plan, Northern Health will monitor discussion between federal and provincial governments on the future evolution of publicly funded health services. Where appropriate, we will provide input on and continue to advocate for the interests of northern, rural, and remote communities.

- 7. On-going communication** - People want to hear from Northern Health. They want to hear how health services will meet the needs of their communities, that they can access decision makers in the health system, and that decision makers will take into account the opinions and needs of stakeholders.

Northern Health will take several steps on this level including holding a formal consultation every two years, ensuring ongoing communication/meetings between NH and local and First Nations representatives and governments, providing timely responses to questions or concerns, holding NH Board meetings throughout the region while providing Northern BC residents several ways to speak with the Board, developing an easier-to-use www.northernhealth.ca website, and communicating in plain English as much as possible.

We have found that municipal councils and their health liaison committees have been valuable regular forums for discussing health concerns at a community level. This avenue of communication is something that we wish to continue with.

As we work to implement these steps, we will act within the context of our business plan as well as our performance agreement with the BC Ministry of Health Services.

We encourage you to read the full consultation response, beginning on the next page. We look forward to conducting this type of formal consultation on an on-going basis, beginning again in 2006. In the meantime, we welcome and appreciate your comments and suggestions.

Introduction

Through the spring and early summer of 2004, Northern Health hosted its first community consultation. The “Let’s Talk About Health” community consultation workbook and community working sessions asked Northern British Columbians how we could work together to address the following key health questions:

1. **Roles of individuals, families, and communities** – How can individuals and families improve the overall health of their community?
2. **Achieving better health in Northern BC** – How should we define “success” in working toward better health for the residents of Northern British Columbia?
3. **Working together to create better health in Northern BC** – How can community groups, agencies and organizations work with each other and Northern Health to create better health in Northern BC?
4. **Related Services** – Which programs and/or health services have the greatest potential to improve the health of residents in your community?

Through the working sessions and workbook feedback, Northern British Columbians provided valuable information to help our organization and the communities we serve to improve our overall health and delivery of health services.

In receiving the consultation feedback, Northern Health’s Board committed to studying the results and reporting back to stakeholders on how the consultation process has influenced the provision of short- and long-term health services in Northern BC communities. The Board also committed to outlining a process of on-going communication and consultation with the communities that Northern Health serves.

This document will tell you how we will act on the consultation feedback, and how we intend to maintain on-going discussions with our stakeholders. There are small steps that Northern Health and its stakeholders can take to encourage improvements in the health of the overall population. There are also larger, longer-term directions that health providers and stakeholders can promote to encourage better health for Northern British Columbians.

Northern Health will take several steps to help improve the overall health of Northern British Columbians and the responsiveness of health services to the needs of the communities we serve. This will take place within the context of Northern Health’s Business Plan, as well as the performance agreement we have with the BC Ministry of Health Services.

Some of these steps can be as simple as putting in a new policy directive at a local level or making a small change to an existing program. Others can involve an extra phone call or conversation with a stakeholder group when NH looks to establish a new program or service. Still others can involve broad changes to how our organization sets out to meet health care needs such as the establishment of our strategic directions. It is also important to ensure that we build on what is already working in communities and program areas rather than reinventing processes.

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Promoting good health and preventing health problems

A key theme of feedback from the consultation was a need to prevent health problems as much as possible. Participants told us that they clearly prefer to see a stronger emphasis on encouraging better personal health to prevent illness and injury among Northern British Columbians.

There are many approaches our health region can take to meet that goal. Working with local health groups and seniors organizations to make programs more responsive to community needs is one objective. Supporting community organizations in efforts to improve the health of our communities is another option. Changing our organization's overall approach to preventive healthcare is also a strategy we can take. Our activities are also influenced by our performance agreement with the BC Ministry of Health Services.

Based on the feedback from the consultation process, Northern Health will take several steps:

- 1. Budget increase for prevention initiatives** - We will increase the amount of our budget spent on population health, public health, mental health, addictions, and home care services in each year from 2004-2008 and work to implement a framework that will drive our services in a more "upstream" preventive direction.
- 2. Strategic prevention investments** - We will carefully invest resources that will help boost preventive health services that we offer, in an effort to improve the overall health of our region's residents. We will focus on health promotion and disease prevention to achieve this goal.
- 3. Partnerships** - We will develop working partnerships with community groups and organizations to support health at all stages of life. These include initiatives to improve the health of children, seniors, and at-risk populations; more effective chronic disease management; and increased attention to areas such as mental health and addictions, and palliative care.
- 4. Collaboration among health care providers** - We will work with physicians and clinical leaders to improve the prevention and management of chronic diseases, especially diabetes.
- 5. Stop smoking priority** - We will support a comprehensive way of reducing tobacco use across our region. Tobacco use is the single greatest cause of preventable illness in the North.
- 6. Skill development** - We will work towards supporting health promotion efforts that help people in Northern communities learn the skills they need to improve their own health.
- 7. Reduce motor vehicle trauma** - We will work with stakeholders to reduce high trauma and death rates due to motor vehicle crashes in Northern BC. The fatality rate among Northern British Columbians from motor vehicle crashes is double the provincial average.

To help move change along, Northern Health will work with other key prevention agencies to organize a road safety conference in 2005. NH will involve Northern stakeholders and agencies/organizations focused on road safety to find ways to address our chronically high rates of injury and death related to motor vehicle crashes.

Our focus on preventive health care is a long-term one. It may take years to show tangible improvements in our overall health as a result of prevention plans we put in place. But Northern British Columbians clearly want to see us improve the overall health of communities through preventive steps, and we intend to do that.

Local service availability

Participants told us that they value the availability of local health services, and feel Northern Health must ensure residents across our region have access to key services. We also have to provide services within the frameworks of agreements that we hold with the BC Ministry of Health Services, that ensure accessible health services across the entire province.

Northern Health will work to provide effective local services and care for our patients through the following measures:

- 1. In-patient hospital beds** - Given that the overall health of Northern BC residents is not as good as that of other British Columbians, we have provided and will continue to provide more in-patient hospital beds than the provincial average to meet our region's increased needs.
- 2. Access to emergency and diagnostic services** - We will ensure access to emergency and diagnostic services continue to be provided within the limits that the BC Ministry of Health Services has established for all of the province's health regions.
- 3. Specialist services available in each Health Services Delivery Area** - We will ensure each health service delivery area will have access to specialized medical care in obstetrics, pediatrics, general surgery, orthopedic surgery, internal medicine, and psychiatry.
- 4. Recruitment of health care providers** - We will continue working with physicians and clinical leaders across the region to identify and put in place recruitment plans for needed staff.
- 5. Working together to coordinate delivery of health services to individuals** - By bringing together all different aspects of the health system into one organization, we will work to provide our patients, clients, and residents better access to all the services that will meet their individual health care needs.
- 6. Responsive and appropriate long-term care** - We will ensure the availability of appropriate numbers of long-term care beds, Independent Living Units (with Support Services), and community care programs for seniors and people with disabilities. We will provide these programs to our clients based on their assessed needs as determined by registered nurses who specialize in case assessments.

Improving access

Northern Health is by far the largest health region in BC by geography. But it's also the smallest by population. This presents challenges in terms of providing some specialty services within reasonable distances of communities across our region.

There are some highly specialized services that will continue to only be offered through facilities in very large population centres. But we can take steps to ensure our residents have access to the core services and specialties needed to maintain good health.

The North is also home to a significant number of Aboriginal people who may have less than ideal access to health services. Poverty, geography, cultural barriers, jurisdictional issues, and other issues can all limit their access to the health care that they need. We must take steps to ensure that Aboriginal people in our region have the access to the health services they need in a manner that recognizes their unique needs.

Northern Health will take the following steps to improve access to health services:

1. **Travel support** - With new funding from the Ministry of Health Services, we will run new transportation services with community partners to offer transportation to patients and clients requiring access to non-emergent specialized services.

This service will provide ground transportation between Northern BC communities for people requiring health services, lower cost airfares back to the home communities of patients who have been air medivac-ed on short notice to southern BC for care, and reduced cost accommodations for patients who have to leave their home community for medical treatment reasons and need an overnight hotel/motel stay.

Local providers in the Bulkley Valley have provided a highly effective service between Smithers and Terrace, from which we can learn as we work to develop this new service. We intend to work with community partners to plan this program and put it into place.

2. **Enhancing Telemedicine Services** - Whenever possible, we will enhance telemedicine services to conduct health consultations through a video-link. In some cases, this will help reduce the time and expense associated with travel for a medical appointment.
3. **Improving services and access for Aboriginal residents** - Aboriginal health services are provided through many different avenues. Some involve federal government services, others involve programs sponsored and organized by local Aboriginal health organizations.

NH has taken steps to help fund community driven initiatives to improve Aboriginal health, such as the Aboriginal Health Initiatives Program that has provided grants to local programs over the past several years.

While we are not the main funding agency for Aboriginal health services, we can provide services and supports that better link programs together to benefit Aboriginal people in our region. We can also make certain that our health planning and services take into account the unique health needs of Aboriginal people.

Funding of health services

Health care costs continue to rise. Northern Health has practiced fiscal restraint in its first three-and-a-half years as an organization. While we remain committed to fiscal discipline, we must also ensure service needs are met within the fiscal framework in which we operate. We also have to invest strategically so our organization can continue to offer stable health care services for our residents into the future.

Given these facts, Northern Health will take the following steps:

1. **Balanced budgets** - We will make sure we operate within annually balanced budgets.
2. **Service objective budgeting** - We will begin a new budget process in the fiscal year 2006/2007 that looks at the service objectives for specific populations and client groups within our region, rather than just Northern Health's organizational units.
3. **Planning to account for regional equitability** - Northern Health will make sure resources are equitably distributed to communities and services across the region. We will look at data and evidence in doing our planning.
4. **Planning and budgeting for future facility and equipment needs** - In consultation with clinical and service leaders in our organization and our funding partners/stakeholders, Northern Health has developed a capital plan to address facility and equipment needs until 2008. We will now begin identifying the funding and partnerships required to meet the region's health care capital needs over the medium-and-long-term.
5. **Cost-effective administration levels** - We will make sure management levels are maintained at sustainable yet cost-effective levels. Right now, about six per cent of our annual budget is spent on administrative functions, which is the second lowest level of all of the province's regional health authorities.

Given our needs in terms of ensuring quality services for our patients and longer-term management development, we will plan for annual spending of six-and-a-half to seven per cent on management functions. This will ensure effective management of the health system in the North at a low cost.

Strategic direction

Many stakeholders have expressed a need for an overall plan for health services across our region.

Northern Health staff members and Board members are preparing a Strategic Plan for 2004 to 2008 that will set a direction for the organization to improve the health of Northern British Columbians.

The plan will take into account the feedback received through the consultation process. We will also include strategies that NH's Board and Executive Team members have deemed important. These will be based on health needs being experienced in Northern Health programs and facilities, and information/data about health trends in Northern BC.

More details of this plan will be available in the near future.

Building an organization for now and the future

As Northern Health evolves, we have an opportunity to develop long-term solutions to help us overcome future human resource shortages, service problems, and more. To be a leader in rural health care, we have to be a model employer in rural health care. We also have to look to future needs that our organization may require, as veteran health care professionals move to other positions or retire.

Northern Health will take the following steps to build a better organization over the next several years.

- 1. Respectful workplaces** - We will build a better work environment by adopting policies and procedures that promote respect for all individuals in the workplace.
- 2. Including medical staff in decision-making** - We will work to ensure we have the active inclusion of input from our medical staff in the organization's decision-making processes through Northern Health's medical staff structures.
- 3. Safe workplaces** - We will work to ensure the safest workplaces are available for everyone working in Northern Health.
- 4. Staff education and development** - We will invest in staff education and development to build expertise in our organization, and develop the talents of our future leaders. This will help retain staff for the long-term, helping to provide stable delivery of services in our region.
- 5. Measuring and continually improving how we deliver services** - We will work with our employees to continuously measure results and performance, and look for ways to improve the health services we provide.
- 6. Information to support delivery of health services to individuals** - We will build the information infrastructure needed to ensure residents of Northern BC get quality care in locations across the region, and that care-givers can provide appropriate care consistent with a patient's individual needs.

Advocacy for health in Northern BC

The people we consulted with want us to do more to ensure that we advocate for their health needs.

We talk with senior levels of government on a regular basis about unique health needs in the north and strategies to address them. Every staff member who participates in provincial meetings and initiatives is involved in advocating for support to address the health needs of people who live in the Northern Health region.

As part of our upcoming strategic plan, Northern Health will monitor discussion between federal and provincial governments on the future evolution of publicly funded health services. Where appropriate, we will provide input on and continue to advocate for the interests of northern, rural, and remote communities.

On-going communication

People want to hear from Northern Health. They want to hear how we will provide health services that will meet the needs of their communities. They want to know that they can access decision makers in the health system, and that those decision makers will take into account the opinions of stakeholders as we provide effective health service delivery.

We will take a number of steps to maintain our existing communications links and build new ones:

- 1. Regular Formal Consultation** - Northern Health will commit to holding this same consultation process once every two years. This biannual process will allow enough time to take into account the feedback received from our communities and develop plans of action. Northern Health intends to hold the next community consultation process in 2006.
- 2. Ongoing communication between NH and local and First Nations representatives and governments** - NH will continue seeking the help of the region's local governments as well as Tribal Councils and First Nations organizations in developing a formal way for on-going talks between our agencies on health related issues.
- 3. Timely responses to inquiries** - NH will ensure timely responses to inquiries from Northern BC residents. We will continue to offer local administrators and site managers as the main contacts for questions and concerns.

It had been suggested through the consultation process that NH establish an ombudsman's office to provide an avenue for the public and stakeholders to voice concerns or seek resolution to health issues. Our local administrators and site managers are required to deal with patients and their families to resolve any concerns, and we are confident in their abilities to do that. However, our Board has asked staff to develop structure and guidelines to ensure that questions and concerns from stakeholders and the public are dealt with in a timely, reasonable, and comprehensive way.

- 4. Board meetings throughout the region** - We will continue holding Northern Health's regular Board meetings in communities throughout our region.
- 5. Access to public Board meetings** - We will continue to provide public presentation sessions at all of our public board meetings and will use telephone conferencing, video conferencing, and other methods to make sure that presenters from across the region can have their say if they can't attend in person.
- 6. Revitalize the Northern Health website** - We will work to revitalize the www.northernhealth.ca website in a manner that offers stronger portals to health information for our residents, more accurately displays our communities as we conduct health recruitment efforts, and provides more direct contact information for health services concerns and/or questions.
- 7. Continue health promotion communications efforts** - We will continue to conduct strategic advertising to promote immunization clinics and other health services. We use public communication opportunities such as our news releases to promote programs that can offer health support to our residents, such as the toll-free BC NurseLine health information line, our stop-smoking programs, and initiatives that can help the public and our stakeholders improve their own health and knowledge of local/provincial health services.

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- 8. Communicate in plain English** - As we did in our 2003/2004 annual report, we will continue to offer plain language, non-technical updates on where people can get services. Our annual reports for 2003/2004 (available at www.northernhealth.ca) contained local service guides for community clusters across the region, describing health services people could use and how to get in touch with them.
- 9. Regular meetings with elected officials** - We will continue our regular meetings with elected officials across the region including representatives from local governments and their umbrella organizations, such as the North Central Municipal Association.
- 10. Media communication** - Through media communication, discussion with our stakeholders, and other opportunities, we will tell our communities and stakeholders how we have made changes in our organization that reflect questions and concerns voiced in the consultation process.

Additional issues and initiatives

While there were themes that came up many times in the consultation process, there were some matters that aren't easily placed in a particular category. Here are some of those topics.

- 1. Improved discharge planning** - Hospitals stays have become much shorter over the years due to less invasive treatments and new procedures that can be performed without a patient remaining in hospital overnight. But some of the people we talked with told us that we have to do a better job of supporting patients in their recovery after they leave hospital.

Some of the discussion related back to the need to travel to larger communities for specialized care, and the problems some people have faced related to return travel or accommodation. Some of the options that Northern Health is developing under the new travel assistance program are intended to make this a less stressful experience for people who need specialized services not available in their home community.

In terms of in-hospital arrangements, our health professionals help arrange follow-up care for patients who will continue to need health services even after they've been discharged from hospital. These arrangements work for patients in many cases. But there are times that they do not. We will investigate how to make discharge planning work better, and encourage further suggestions from people who have ideas on this topic.

- 2. More use of nurse practitioners** - Nurse practitioners are a valued part of many health systems. Training spaces in Northern British Columbia for nurse practitioners have increased, and new graduates will complete their studies at the University of Northern British Columbia shortly.

Northern Health staff members view the addition of nurse practitioners as an important part of providing good health care services in our region. We are now working on how we can bring nurse practitioners into health facilities across the region, and to make sure that their skills are used to their fullest potential.

- 3. More support of holistic/complementary practices** - Through the consultation process, there was discussion regarding increasing support for these types of practices and using them to reduce costs of health procedures.

The difficulty in incorporating holistic or alternative therapies is that Northern Health is funded for very specific health services and operates under extensive regulatory frameworks. There would be many changes needed at agencies outside of Northern Health's control to integrate these services.

In addition, while complementary and alternative health practices may be of significant benefit to individuals, they are generally not held to uniform standards of evidence and accountability for safety and effectiveness, and for the training of practitioners. Northern Health is expected to focus on services which are evidence based, grounded in the scientific peer review process, and employ health professionals trained in accredited settings.

The overall sentiment in focusing more on holistic/complementary practices was to prevent serious and costly health issues, and we agree with that direction. That's why in Northern Health's new strategic plan, we will focus on health promotion and disease prevention, and partnering with community groups to help us achieve this goal.

Conclusion

The first Northern Health Community Consultation provided valuable information to influence our activities. By combining the feedback we received through the consultation process with identified clinical and organizational needs, we've developed steps that will help us come closer to our vision of being a model of excellence in rural health care.

We have a lot of work to do. But many of the steps outlined in this document will help us to improve the overall health of Northern BC residents, provide accessible services in a sustainable manner, and build our organization to provide stable and dependable health services over the long run.

We look forward to keeping you informed about how we are meeting the objectives laid out in this document. We're excited about conducting this consultation process again in 2006. In the meantime, we encourage you to provide on-going feedback.



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For more information on Northern Health, please visit www.northernhealth.ca