1. Primary Healthcare

Vision

Yukoners can access the care they need from a team of health and social service providers, at a time and in a way that works for them. The focus is on caring for people and communities as a whole, rather than treating a specific illness.

Why primary health care is important

Primary health care is the first place people go for health and wellness services. For example, Yukoners may visit a family doctor, a nurse, or other health and social service professionals. Today, most of the focus is on care for urgent health problems. This is important, but it may not be all that Yukoners need. Also, not everyone has the best access to care. This is particularly true if they need after-hours care for a problem that is not an emergency.

The trend in modern primary health care includes a broader range of coordinated services, provided by diverse teams of professionals. These systems focus more on prevention, mental health, harm reduction practices, and addressing the many factors that influence health, such as income, housing, food security, education, culture, workplaces and environment.

How our system works now

Access

Primary health care services are delivered in a variety of settings across the territory (medical clinics, community health centres, hospitals, etc.). Territory-wide, after-hours access to non-emergency care is limited.

Care is typically provided by:

**PHYSICIANS:**
- Physicians are the most common primary health care providers.

**NURSES:**
- In the 11 community health centres across the territory, care is provided by primary health care nurses with an expanded scope of practice.

**NURSE PRACTITIONERS:**
- Nurse practitioners (NPs) are registered nurses with additional education which enables them to diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests and prescribe medication. There are currently five nurse practitioners working in the territory, including one in a rural community (Mayo).
Despite this range of providers, we hear that Yukoners cannot always access the health services they need, when they need them. We have a large number of general practice doctors for our population, (68 with an active practice) but the majority (73 per cent) work part-time. About 25 per cent of Yukoners report being unable to secure a regular family doctor, and there is no coordinated process to find a doctor. After-hours and weekend care is limited. There is one walk-in clinic in the territory.

Use of nurse practitioners as primary providers is limited, despite the evidence of the quality of care and efficiencies for the system. Restricted hospital privileges prevent full use of nurse practitioners and licensed practical nurses.

**Prevention**

- Our public health centres offer maternal and child health services, immunizations, chronic conditions support, outreach and communicable disease testing and support.
- Health promotion programs include healthy eating, tobacco prevention and cessation, sexual health education and support for healthy behaviours in school-aged children.
- The Children’s Dental Program provides free diagnostic, preventive and restorative services to children across the territory.
- Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services provides a variety of mental wellness, substance and addictions treatment, and harm reduction services.

While there are some great initiatives underway, Yukon does not have an overarching vision of prevention, and no comprehensive approach to illness prevention, community development or capacity building, and health promotion.

**Possible ways forward for Yukon**

Yukon’s current health system provides quality care, and has areas of great innovation and collaboration. We have an opportunity to transform this into a primary health care system that:

- provides more equitable access to care,
- is focused on prevention and wellness,
- is coordinated and well integrated,
- is sustainable and cost effective,
- combines knowledge and experience of a team of health and social services providers, and
- leads to better health and wellness for all Yukoners.
Here are some of the ideas that were suggested to the panel:

**Making access more equitable**

- Expand access to after-hours care, with a preference for care models where teams of health and social service professionals work together, where there are strong links with other health and social services, and where specific needs can be met (e.g. for bilingual health services).

- Work to ensure all Yukoners have access to a primary care provider by encouraging doctors to take on new patients but also increasing the use of nurse practitioners throughout the system.

- Build upon the success and learnings of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation Health Centre and create opportunities for Indigenous primary health care service delivery models.

- Develop expertise in LGBTQ2S+ health, including transgender health, which includes all components of health and increased mental health supports.

**Shifting the focus to prevention**

- Focus on a prevention and wellness approach that includes investments in prenatal care, early childhood development, health promotion and early screening and intervention for Yukoners.

- Support the development of community-based health programs. Design programs in partnership with those using the programs to make sure the needs of the community are met.

**Ensure the system is sustainable**

- Ensure health professionals such as nurse practitioners, licensed practical nurses, midwives, pharmacists and paramedics are able to work to the full scope of practice, and have hospital privileges to build efficiencies into the system.

- Increase team-based, collaborative models of care to increase efficiencies and reduce redundancies.

Yukon is not alone on this journey; many other jurisdictions across Canada are working to build more comprehensive, prevention-focused primary health care systems. There are many models to look at as examples, but most focus on the social determinants of health and integrating care around patients using team-based, interdisciplinary care models. By innovating in care delivery, we can develop a system that better supports the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness of all Yukoners.
Questions for discussion

1. What is the best thing about your care from your doctor or your community health centre?

2. Are you able to get appointments when you need them, at a time that is convenient for you and your family?

3. Are there services the government could provide to support you and your family in making healthy lifestyle choices?

4. In what ways could we invest more in promoting wellness and preventing disease? What specific areas should we focus on? If we had a healthier population and could invest less in illness care, what would be priorities for increased investment instead?

5. What’s the most important thing that should be different about primary health care (services, prevention and access) in Yukon?