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Collaboration: An Opportunity for Canada to Make Health Workplaces Healthier



As the agenda for achieving high quality and safe health care moves forward, so too must the agenda for increasing the quality of worklife for health care providers. This idea is supported by Canadian health care organizations, which are continually striving to improve the quality of care through excellent service provision, research, and teaching. For many health care professionals, it is instinctual that quality of worklife is linked with the quality and outcomes of their work; however, there is not yet system-wide action on the issue in Canada.

Where the public is concerned, citizens often approach the health of the health care system through the lens of access and wait times, and increasingly safety and quality. Arguing that increased quality of worklife within health care workplaces must be given priority on the public's agenda may be a challenge, but it is a necessary step. As Shamian and El-Jardali (2007) point out, the evidence is there: quality of worklife has an overall impact on "workers' health and well-being, quality of care, patient safety, organizational performance and societal outcomes." Keeping the lens of the public in mind, "the ability to reduce wait-times and ultimately, the sustainability of the Canadian healthcare system depends on a strong supply of healthy healthcare workers" (Quality Worklife–Quality Healthcare Collaborative, 2007).

Despite the challenges of positioning quality of worklife as a priority on the agenda of health system stakeholders and others, there exist pockets of excellent work in quality of worklife across Canada. Often these practices and initiatives are recognized within their respective jurisdictions, but generally occur in relative isolation. As a result, the potential to spread promising practices and fuel further innovation is lost. These silos of creativity and initiative are like stones that are thrown into the water without producing ripples. Within Canada, there is an imperative need for that ripple effect to occur across the health care system, particularly in the face of limited resources, constant financial pressures, and a shared interest in sustaining a robust workforce.

The Quality Worklife–Quality Healthcare Collaborative

In an environment rife with ongoing challenges of access, retention, burnout, and disengagement, as well as increasing public expectations in relation to quality and safety, the Quality Worklife–Quality Healthcare Collaborative (QWQHC) was formed by a group of ten national organizations. The CEOs of these organizations recognized and acted on a concern that despite existing strategies to improve quality worklife and increasing evidence of a linkage between positive worklife and patient/client outcomes, implementation was limited and knowledge transfer ineffective. Today, 12 partners strong (see sidebar), the work of the QWQHC

is propelled by the shared belief that "a fundamental way to better healthcare is through healthier healthcare workplaces. It is unacceptable to fund, govern, manage, work in or receive care in an unhealthy healthcare workplace" (QWQHC, 2007). With the financial support of these national partners and additional funds from Health Canada, the QWQHC is able to build on a healthy workplace strategy that will benefit health care providers, administrators, users, and the system as a whole.

The coming together of these organizations is noteworthy as it signifies an approach to quality of worklife issues in health care and to systems outcomes in a pan-Canadian context, without designating one organization as having ownership of "the problem." It promotes the notion that quality of worklife within health care is an issue of concern for all (including clients), and that only through shared ownership, pooling of strengths, and an aligned implementation strategy can we move forward in a meaningful and sustainable way.

The Quality Worklife–Quality Healthcare Collaborative (QWQHC) is a coalition of health leaders working together to create healthier workplaces and ultimately improve patient care. Through national action and knowledge exchange, we are building a healthy workplace strategy that will benefit health care providers, administrators, users, and the system as a whole. The QWQHC national partners are

**Academy of Canadian Executive Nurses
Accreditation Canada (Coordinating Secretariat)
Association of Canadian Academic Healthcare Organizations
Canadian College of Health Service Executives
Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions
Canadian Healthcare Association
Canadian Health Services Research Foundation
Canadian Medical Association
Canadian Nurses Association
Canadian Patient Safety Institute
Health Action Lobby
Victorian Order of Nurses**

Our Work to Date

Since our formation in 2005, the QWQHC has developed and shared an evidence-informed pan-Canadian framework and healthy workplace action strategy to provide leaders with ideas on where to begin and how to achieve success. This work was made possible through the leadership, guidance, and contribution of many, including our national partners, stakeholders, and more than 45 experts who were consulted on various aspects of the QWQHC's work (QWQHC, 2007).

The QWQHC action strategy identifies three areas of immediate action that support evidence-informed management and accountability practices: (1) quality of worklife measurement and reporting, (2) knowledge exchange, and (3) implementation of improvement strategies.

To date, the QWQHC has identified seven organizational and two system-level indicators that health organizations/systems should build into their management information systems, performance agreements, and accountability reports.

In support of the action strategy, the QWQHC has also developed and begun to implement a framework to help exchange and apply knowledge, leading practices, and research on healthy workplace strategies across Canada.

Finally, the QWQHC has identified priority actions known to improve both system-wide and organizational performance in relation to quality of worklife. These include creating capacity for knowledge exchange; establishing comprehensive and integrated strategies linking human resources management, occupational health and safety, and organizational development; and promoting enhanced accountability agreements and accreditation standards.

To acknowledge, support, and engage diverse organizations in improving health care workplaces, and to recognize the critical mass of health care stakeholders committed to quality of worklife, the action strategy includes a Healthy Healthcare Leadership Charter. The QWQHC encourages all health leaders to join their colleagues across the country and signal their commitment to action by signing the Healthy Healthcare Leadership Charter. Close to 50 systems/organizations have signed the charter to date, representing the many work sites actively engaged in improving quality of worklife to retain health providers and improve patient/client care.

Why a Collaborative?

Canada lacks a mechanism within its health system for sharing information and coordinating actions on human

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resources practices and quality of worklife issues. The QWQHC offers a unique opportunity to the health system to fill this gap: (1) our partnership model reaches many audiences across the health system; (2) our scope spans jurisdictions, health sectors, and disciplines; and (3) our framework links quality of worklife to quality of health care, enabling a comprehensive and effective approach to addressing health human resources and system sustainability.

The collaborative approach allows diverse stakeholders to access knowledge, tools, models of innovative practice, research, and national discussion on quality of worklife issues. They can then take that knowledge and apply it in a way that speaks directly to their specific context, making their changes meaningful and ultimately, more sustainable. The QWQHC can leverage its network of partners and their constituents. By bridging key players and initiatives across the country, the efficiency and effectiveness of efforts can be optimized, bringing about rapid, evidence-informed, system-wide change.

Finally, the tremendous power of key health care stakeholders speaking together with a shared vision on this issue increases the likelihood of concentrated action and successful outcomes.

Future Direction

While stakeholders now have access to a framework and action strategy addressing quality of worklife in health care, ongoing national coordination and integration remains an essential ingredient for effective and responsive action. The QWQHC is currently positioned to drive the quality of worklife agenda by leading, facilitating, and supporting the various elements of our action strategy in the upcoming years.

In the next phase of work, the QWQHC will endeavour to engage "change agents" on the front lines of the health system (i.e. within service delivery organizations), while continuing to inform and collaborate at the system-wide level. As such, the QWQHC plans to remain a conduit for the exchange of experience and expertise, and will develop as a clearing house of current knowledge on quality of worklife in health care. The continued development of a strong and effective knowledge exchange network that is inclusive of the multiple and diverse perspectives of the health care system is paramount.

In addition to building our knowledge network, we will keep working on common sets of quality of worklife indicators, aiming to advance their monitoring and use for quality improvement, evaluation, and reporting purposes.

The QWQHC will continue to draw on expertise to enrich our information base and make it accessible to stakeholders through various means. We will simultaneously make a



concerted effort to follow the stories of our Healthy Healthcare Leadership Charter signatories and other quality of worklife champions with a view to sharing their learning and successes.

Conclusion

The continued support of our national partners and the QWQHC's ability to engage a broad array of health system stakeholders will be instrumental in enabling the Collaborative to achieve its goal of driving improvements in quality worklife and quality health care.

Regardless of the shape this collaborative approach takes, it is anticipated that over time, the linkages the QWQHC facilitates, the engagement with the issue it inspires, and the critical mass it generates will lead to sustainable action and continued growth in quality of worklife for health care providers. Ripples in the water. Q

We invite all those who are interested in moving forward the agenda for improved quality of worklife for health care providers to get involved with the efforts and future work of the QWQHC. Continue to follow the work of the QWQHC and of your peers by accessing our action strategy, signing our Charter, or seeking resources on our continually evolving website at www.qwqhc.ca.

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