

# Health Reform Requires Strength and Great Information:

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The proposed transfer of nursing homes to the Department of Health or to the Health Authorities is a mistake of the highest order! Nursing homes are important elements of the Long Term Care System. They have progressed a long way from the old days of crowded facilities with bad smells. Several nursing homes in NB are now recognized internationally as leaders in Long Term Care and could teach us all a lot about eldercare.

Patients occupying hospital beds while awaiting assessment for and placement in a long term care program are referred to as ALCs (alternate level of care). The increase of acute care beds occupied by such persons should come as no surprise but moving nursing homes to Health will not provide any quick fix for this problem. The issue has had widespread conversation for decades. Proposals that would alleviate ALCs have been put before decision-makers repeatedly over many years with little response.

In 1992, the McKenna Government with a visionary Minister of Health, Dr. King, introduced the regionalization of hospitals. Fifty five hospital boards were, without notice, fired! Across the province there was uproar particularly in small, rural communities where jobs were at stake and doctors were concerned for their cash flow and family security.

For three years there was significant upset in the health system that spilled over into each community affected and the distress gave the Tories much fodder for future elections. So by 1995 the election language had to be softened.

That was intended as Phase 1 of a multi-stage reform of health care services. And all this had been preceded by 30 years of consulting reports recommending major reform of the system.

The Coalition of Concerned Citizens convened a Health Symposium on Monday, December 2, 2019 with Dr. Chris Simpson from Queens University, a New Brunswick native, as keynote speaker. The day consisted of a succession of stellar speakers: physicians, economists, engineers, nurse administrators, the public.....all calling for major reform in the health and long term care system. Major themes were repeated that included innovation, engagement, and major culture reform. Dr. Simpson emphasized that if you “fix Senior Care you basically fix the health system!”

It was heartening to hear the Minister of Health suggest that government wants to introduce major change in the health system. His courage is heartening to those who have been pleading for essential change in the system for decades. Indeed, all of what people see as current system deficits were elements generally considered to be included in Part 2 of the health reform of 1992.

Following the election of 1995, a succession of provincial governments of both major parties seemingly discarded the concept of Phase 2. This phase was intended to integrate Long Term Care and other elements of health service such as Public Health into a system in which regional structures effected appropriate integration and seamless care.

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Prior to the 1992 incursion into the hospital system, government had the wisdom to engage the leaders of the Hospital system, Medical Society, and Nursing Association. This group was unanimous in their advice to government and this advice was helpful to government since they could, and did, say that their action was based on unanimous consent of the key organizations then in the system.

The current proposal to move nursing homes to the Department of Health is already showing signs of fracturing. It has, at its foundation, the thinking that the ALC patients in hospital, now apparently 31% of acute care beds in Horizon, could be more efficiently transferred to nursing homes if the health authority had control of them. As a statement of principle, that sounds interesting.

But the Devil is in the details. There are mountains of issues that contribute to those ALC patients staying in hospital. Some family doctors are pretty good with eldercare, others not so much. As Dr. Simpson so eloquently pointed out at the Symposium and the Health Council has confirmed, most of these patients experience multiple chronic medical conditions that impair their health, mobility, cognition, and living. Most family doctors offices are not equipped to help patients manage multiple ailments nor do they have access to a one-stop approach that would make it efficient for patients and families.

Then there is the issue of keeping these same elders, with multiple ailments, safe at home. Home care has been wanting for leadership and streamlining for decades and the Department of Health turned the most important element of home care, Extramural, over to a third party, Medavie, which further exacerbates communication and integration.

Special Care Homes have the capacity to play a much larger role in the care of this group of seniors and for the over 3000 currently in their care, they do a remarkable job. There are a number of such homes in Fredericton, Moncton, Shediac, Bathurst and elsewhere that have the added ability to manage persons with advanced challenges of aging. Indeed, with just a bit of support and encouragement, these homes could take many of the ALC patients into their care.

But nursing homes are owned and operated by local not for profit organizations; this is different from the hospital sector in which the major action of 1992 was possible because government actually owned all but the few Catholic hospitals. So if the intent is to actually place the operation of nursing homes under health authorities, the challenge of ownership becomes an issue of substance.

Special Care Homes are already privately owned, a real blessing for the system in that it makes the operators very attentive to expenses and revenues. Owners are highly motivated to work hard at providing excellent care while ensuring that every dollar is invested wisely.

All of this would have been considered in a comprehensive Long Term Care Strategy had it been created.

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Dr. Chris Simpson, Cardiologist and Associate Dean, Queens University Medical School; keynote speaker at the Health Symposium held by the Coalition of Concerned Citizens, December 2.19

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