

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Acute care concerns: Psychiatrists are fighting for better mental health care

Psychiatrists specialize in caring for patients with mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, but their work goes far beyond diagnoses and prescription pads.

Today's psychiatrists are also tireless mental health advocates working to address the social, economic and medical factors that shape mental health. They work closely with other professionals to address the social determinants of health – factors like housing, income and social support – that profoundly influence a person's mental health.

Despite this comprehensive approach, system-level barriers in Alberta often hinder the continuous, high-quality care psychiatrists are specially trained to provide.

Hospital-based psychiatry is overburdened, under-resourced

Inpatient psychiatry units across Alberta often operate beyond 100% capacity, leaving many patients waiting in emergency departments for a bed to become available. These pressures are compounded by a psychiatry workforce that has not kept pace with the province's growing population.

At the same time, many beds remain occupied by patients who are medically ready for discharge but cannot leave because appropriate supportive housing is unavailable. And social workers, who are essential to helping patients transition back to the community safely, are in short supply. These trusted liaisons connect patients with mental health supports that prevent hospital readmissions, but heavy patient volumes limit the amount of individual assistance they can provide. As a result, patients who need help securing identification, banking information or other key documents often remain in hospital longer.

Together, these challenges create system-wide gridlock, slow bed turnover and lengthen wait times for people seeking urgent mental health care in emergency departments.

Housing and social supports are the missing bedrock

Housing is foundational to mental health. Without stable housing and adequate social supports, patients struggle to access care, engage in treatment and sustain recovery.

Alberta lacks sufficient supportive housing for people with complex mental health needs. The result is an avoidable bottleneck: patients who are medically ready for discharge remain in hospital because they have nowhere safe to go, inpatient psychiatry units face added strain, and patients in crisis wait longer in emergency departments.

Compensation challenges undermine access for rural Albertans

Inadequate psychiatrist compensation continues to limit access to mental health care in rural Alberta. Many psychiatrists who provide regular service in rural and remote communities are ineligible for rural funding simply because they do not live in the community – even though their work fills critical care gaps in these areas.

This mismatch between compensation and care delivery makes it difficult to recruit and retain psychiatrists in rural Alberta. As a result, Albertans in these communities face longer wait times, fewer local care options and reduced continuity of care.

Psychiatrists propose a path forward

Alberta's psychiatrists have the solutions to a health system where quality, comprehensive mental health care is available and accessible. They are calling on the province to implement meaningful changes that will ensure every Albertan receives the mental health care they need and deserve.

- **Increase inpatient psychiatry capacity**, recognizing critical role psychiatry beds play in the health system, particularly in managing patient flow through the emergency department.
- **Bolster supportive housing and social infrastructure**, recognizing that good mental health starts with a strong social fabric. Without stable housing, income support, AISH and other key supports, many Albertans are left vulnerable to mental health challenges.
- **Address compensation inequities**, particularly for psychiatrists serving rural Alberta, to improve recruitment and ensure communities have consistent access to care.
- **Invest in the psychiatry workforce** to meet the growing need for mental health care in Alberta. Part of the solution, experts say, lies in properly funding university training programs and ensuring that compensation reflects the complexity and demands of the profession.

Taken together, these measures would strengthen Alberta's mental health system, reduce bottlenecks and ensure that every Albertan can access timely, high quality psychiatric care.

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