

Speaking Notes- Dr. Patrick O'Shea
Setting the Stage – Why Focus on Seniors' Care?
March 30, 2011 Seniors Summit
Holiday Inn, St. John's

A 75-year-old man has Parkinson's Disease. He is being cared for at home by his wife and married daughters. He has frequent falls. Despite efforts to find a reliable and suitable home care worker through agencies and advertisements in the paper, they have had no success. After another fall in the middle of the night, he has no option but to be admitted to a nursing home.

A 70-year-old female with severe arthritis, develops symptoms of a urinary tract infection at 7 PM one night. She spends 5 hours in St. Clare's Emergency Department awaiting a prescription for antibiotics.

An 80-year-old man with early dementia becomes suddenly violent necessitating removal from his home where his 82-year-old wife has been providing his care. He stays in the Waterford Hospital for 6 months awaiting nursing home placement.

An 82-year-old woman falls at home, breaks her hip, and is admitted to the Health Sciences Centre for hip surgery. There, she develops a urinary tract infection three days after surgery. Later she develops pneumonia, becomes quite agitated with an undiagnosed delirium and is heavily sedated. She is now one of the 80 people in our 2 acute care hospitals awaiting placement in an institutional bed.

These are all real patients of mine. Every doctor, nurse and social worker in this room could add their own stories of patients, friends, and relatives, in the final years of life, who have had to endure physical or emotional pain, waiting for treatment and care.

It is hard enough to wait for tests and surgery when you are young. How much harder is it for a 70-year-old with limited mobility, waiting 18 months for a knee or a hip replacement?

The emergency departments are crowded, and many elderly will avoid going there at all costs as they know what they will have to face. Few family doctors have evening or weekend clinics, or an answering service so they can be reached for telephone advice.

Home care is hard to get, restricted in hours, with very little hope of seeing an Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist at home. Nursing homes are forced to reduce to solve budgetary problems, at the same time as sicker people are being admitted. Health care providers are overworked, and too busy to take the extra time that seniors need.

Mental health services are overwhelmed.

We have to do better.

The current medical system does not serve seniors well. Some would argue that it doesn't serve younger patients well either, but that is a debate for another time.

Our province's present day health services, especially in long term care and community support, have developed over the years, usually in response to specific needs. There was no master plan and no coordination of services, resulting in a patchwork of services, with some holes in the fabric. Such a system worked fairly well when the number of seniors was low, and budgets had some discretionary leeway for the inevitable exceptions.

In addition, this province traditionally had many seniors living in small communities being looked after by extended family and friends, with little reliance on government and strangers.

Times have changed. There has been increased urbanization, more out-migration of family members, and a greater need for public health agencies to provide services.

As we all know, the number of seniors is dramatically increasing. In 2006, 13.4% of our population was over 65. That figure will rise to 20% by 2016, and then 25% by 2025 – that is one in 4 Newfoundlanders. Putting it another way, an estimated 125,000 people in this province will be older than 65 by 2025. Our province will have the highest percentage of seniors per capita in this country.

At the present time in Newfoundland and Labrador, there are about 4,000 people in personal care homes, and about 2,500 in nursing home beds. Will this be enough beds when we have 125,000 citizens over 65?

If we all think we are seeing a lot of older people in our practices now, it will become even more noticeable during the next 10 years.

You might ask why start thinking about this problem now? It may already be a little late.

It will cost the medical system and the province greatly to ignore these demographic warnings. To do nothing is dangerous, and actually not an option. We must make suggestions now to benefit us all in the future.

It takes time to properly lobby governments, and sometimes it is difficult for our elected members to look far in the future, farther than a 4-year re-election cycle. It also takes a long time to plan and build the necessary infrastructure, as we are seeing with the new nursing home being constructed in Pleasantville.

I'm pleased that our provincial government has acknowledged the reality of the coming population changes. Last Fall, meetings were held around the province looking at the seniors issue. Government received a lot of information from all involved with seniors care, from family members and seniors, health groups, social agencies, and advocacy groups. Everyone acknowledged we have to do better, with better coordination to prevent gaps in service. How to achieve that is not clear.

I do not envy the Department of Health as it has a gargantuan task to try and coordinate a plan for more appropriate care for the elderly. It is also going to be expensive. How we pay or it is also unclear.

The current provincial health care budget is about \$2.2 billion dollars. Just 10 years ago, it was \$1.2 billion dollars. Will we need to find another billion dollars for health in the next 10 years?

Can seniors care compete with the need for more expensive diagnostic tests and machines, or ever more expensive medications and treatments, or increased human resources, or better roads and sewage treatment plants?

This is why it is crucial to focus on seniors care: we have to address this issue head on to plan for the future. Ignoring it will not make it go away. Ignoring it will mean more expense, more suffering, and more frustration for seniors, caregivers, and health providers.

So what do we hope to accomplish today?

When I took on the presidency of the NLMA last June, I mentioned in my inaugural speech that I wanted to do something to raise the profile of seniors in this province. I had grandiose ideas of a traveling road show to hear from people around the province, and perhaps having a Seniors Pride Day. Well, the government did that consultation tour in the Fall, and the NLMA got involved in contract negotiations with government....

After Christmas, I again brought up the desire to highlight the issue, and a small group of us have been working toward this day. We decided to focus on the medical model of care which will be needed – care provided by the medical, nursing and social work professions in hospitals, nursing homes, and in the community.

We have invited you, frontline doctors, nurses, and social workers to a think tank. I know many other groups were not invited. I acknowledge it is hard to separate the medical model from the societal models which will also have to change to enhance seniors lives. Affordable housing, seniors resource centers, homemaking agencies, advocacy groups such as the Alzheimer's Society, are all very important, but not present here today.

I want you to take a holistic approach today – use your professional work experience, but also your experiences as a family member, and also your anticipated experiences as a consumer in the next 10-20 years. All of these different experiences can influence your opinions. You have been drawn from many facets of health care, but are not here exclusively to represent just your piece of the puzzle.

In the letter I wrote you, I asked that the focus be on 2025 – just 15 years away. I want this meeting to be productive, with a list of things we think we can accomplish in that time span. I also asked you to consider what changes you want to see. These may be big or small, and during the day we will be collecting those ideas. Thank you to those who have thought deeply about their desired changes.

The NLMA will write a report on what we say and debate here today. This will be accessible on our web site for comments from the public and other health care providers. We will also discuss our findings with the provincial government. Where we go from here is undecided, but hopefully we will have more clarity by the end of today.

Seniors are vulnerable members of our society. They deserve to be treated with dignity and the highest level of care that we can provide. As a society, we will be judged by how well we care for them. Everyone in this room wants a better system. Let's collectively start to build it.

Thank you.

-30-