

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The harmful use of alcohol and other drugs and substances is an enormous problem in Canada—a \$40 billion-a-year-problem. Yet the attention paid to problematic substance use is inadequate, and the services devoted to addressing the associated risks and harms are inadequately funded and co-ordinated. This National Treatment Strategy provides direction and recommendations to strengthen the services and supports we offer to Canadians with substance use problems, closing the gap between need and response.

The vast majority of Canadians affected by substance use problems do not use specialized addiction services. However, they do access other sectors of the health care system—as well as other systems such as social services, housing and education. A fundamental challenge in responding effectively to all potential clients is in co-ordinating a broad range of services and supports. Research findings suggest that providing appropriate services and supports across a range of systems not only reduces substance use problems but also improves a wide range of outcomes related to health, social functioning and criminal justice. Such a spectrum of services and supports is also a good investment for government, because it returns economic benefits that far outstrip its cost.

No single sector can tackle this challenge: people in need of help depend on primary care, hospital-based care, specialized addiction services, housing and employment supports, and more—in addition to their own personal resources, including families, friends and other carers. Historically, there has been little integration or effective communication within and between the systems and jurisdictions that provide services and supports to people with substance use problems. As a result, people face considerable

gaps in service and barriers to accessing the help they need. People who may have significant health problems, at a time of great personal strain, must navigate a complex and ever-changing labyrinth of services and supports.

A key recommendation of this Strategy is the development of a tiered continuum of services and supports to address the broad spectrum of risks and harms conferred by substance use. Such an integrated and holistic system-level model has been articulated in the academic literature and has been implemented in other countries. The adoption of a tiered model in Canadian jurisdictions can improve care, co-ordinate services and make better use of existing investments in supports for people with substance use problems.

The tiers in the proposed model represent different levels of services and supports corresponding to the acuity, chronicity and complexity of risks and harms associated with substance use. Services and supports in the lower tiers are open to all and are intended to meet the needs of greater numbers of people, while those in the upper tiers are designed to meet the needs of smaller numbers of people, and in many cases are specialized for people with more severe substance use problems. This tiered model matches the level and kind of services and supports to the specific nature of a person's substance use problem, as well as promoting efficient use of resources.

The tiered model envisioned in this Strategy must be flexible enough to respond to the particular needs of Canada's diverse jurisdictions and populations. However, the model should be based on common principles in whatever contexts it is applied. Most importantly, people must be able to access the continuum of services and supports at

any tier, and at any time be effectively linked to appropriate services and supports that they need. Such a continuum requires an integrated system in which services and supports are linked, both within and between tiers, and in which different jurisdictions and systems must be able to easily share information to co-ordinate services and supports.

The Strategy supports these system-level improvements with recommendations in four strategic areas: knowledge exchange; developing a research program; measuring and monitoring system performance; and reducing stigma and discrimination.

*Knowledge exchange* and *research* are critical supports to the tiered model. While existing funding bodies promote relevant, high-quality research on improving responses to substance use problems, there is no co-ordinated national research program focused on problematic substance use or on needed services and supports. Efforts to improve evidence-informed practice can be guided by the knowledge exchange network recommended in this report.

A tiered system of services and supports depends on high-quality programs as well as a health care system that is integrated and functions effectively. *Measuring* and *monitoring* the performance of services and supports, and of the system as a whole, is a significant challenge, given the lack of comparable outcome data. We need stronger information systems to better assess the effectiveness of services and supports, and to show the value of investing in them. There is a particular need for information on services and supports offered in primary care, since the absence of assessments of efforts in the lower tiers is particularly striking.

Finally, a transformation in the way we serve and support Canadians with substance use problems is not possible until *stigma* and *discrimination* are confronted. Stigma (negative attitudes) leads to discrimination (associated negative behaviour), which prevents people from getting the services

and supports they need. This Strategy recommends an evidence-based, comprehensive approach to improve public understanding and reduce stigma and discrimination related to substance use.

The recommendations of this report comprise a National Treatment Strategy—a plan of action that recognizes the wide range of jurisdictions that administer services and supports for Canadians with substance use problems. An enormous problem cannot be solved by one champion, one government, one organization or even one sector. We have described the key ingredients to start improving substance use services and supports: comprehensive, integrated care; rigorous system and program evaluation; effective research and knowledge exchange; and improved understanding.

Let the work begin.