MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND LONG-TERM CARE
Health Care Connect

FACT SHEET

Title: **Health Care Connect Program**

Date: **March 2009**

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ontario Medical Association have committed to working together to reduce the number of unattached patients in Ontario.

In February 2009, the Ontario government launched a new program called Health Care Connect, which will refer patients to family physicians who are taking on new patients in their community.

Patients will be prioritized based on need for health care services. An Expert Panel has provided clinical recommendations to the Ministry to inform this component of the program.

The program is intended only for individuals without a family physician and participation is not a guarantee of access. Patients are encouraged to continue their own efforts to find a physician while waiting to be referred.

Patients can also be referred to www.ontario.ca/healthcareoptions for information on health care resources in their own community (e.g. walk in clinics, urgent care centres).

How does it work?

Unattached patients can call a special number operated by Clinidata Inc., the provider of Telehealth Ontario (1-800-445-1822), to sign up to a patient database. An online option will be available in the future.

This service will be available Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm in English and French, with 120 languages available as required. The database will determine through a check of Ministry enrolment systems if the patient already has a family doctor. Patients on the database will be prioritized based on their health care needs.

Local Health Integration Network [LHIN] based Care Connectors are nurses from your local Community Care Access Centre. They will be contacting you to learn about your practice and ability to take on new patients. Care Connectors will be your central contact and are an important part of this program.

The LHIN based Care Connectors will carefully review a patient's information in order to facilitate a referral to a physician's practice.

When a family physician agrees to accept a patient referred by the Care Connector, the patient will be given the practice information to schedule their first appointment. The patient's contact information will also be sent to the physician to whom the referral is made.

Prioritizing Patient Need

A Clinical Expert Panel recommended appropriate clinical criteria to direct the triaging of a patient referral based on need for health care services. A complementary prioritization methodology was created to identify the priority/morbidity of the patient.

The clinical criteria will also be used to identify complex/vulnerable patients per Appendix D of the 2008 *Physician Services Agreement* between the Ministry and the Ontario Medical Association [see separate section – New Fees and Fee enhancements].

When calling to register in the program, patients will be asked a series of questions regarding the following health needs criteria:

- Self assessed health status
- Prevalence of chronic conditions
- Activity limiting disability
- Mental health
- Obesity

Children will be assessed with unique criteria. Please refer to Appendix A and B for an overview of the health needs questionnaire.

Patients under the age of two and patients who are currently pregnant will be identified as priority patients in need of care. Families will be indexed, based upon the health needs score of the highest ranked member of the family, so that they may be referred to the same physician if appropriate.

Care Connectors and Patient Referral

Care Connectors will be the central contact for patients and physicians operating out of the LHIN's Community Care Access Centre. There are a minimum of two Care Connectors assigned to each LHIN.

Care Connectors are nurses who will have the following key responsibilities:

- Connect patients according to priority with an appropriate family physician.
- Review patient information and obtain more information if necessary to make a successful connection to a physician (e.g. the Care Connector will consider accessibility issues such as language requirements, wheel chair access, etc.).
- Provide information regarding the referral process to patients/ families as required.
- Provide information to assist patients in accessing alternative community resources if required (e.g. walk-in clinics, after-hour clinics, urgent care centres, etc.).
- Link with LHINs, local agencies such as Community Care Access Centres, hospitals, Family Health Teams, and other related agencies/practices.
- Maintain an inventory of family physicians available to accept new patients.
- Monitor the priority list on the program's database according to the Care Connector's LHIN to ensure changes are made as required (e.g. contact information updates, referral status, etc.).

Care Connectors will be contacting family physicians in their LHIN to discuss Health Care Connect and learn about their practices, including any specific services or clinics that the practice offers and ability to take on new patients. Family physicians may wish to designate a key contact in their practice to communicate with the Care Connector.

Physicians will also be able to contact Care Connectors at their local Community Care Access Centre to sign up patients. Please see Appendix C with the list of contact information for Ontario's 14 Community Care Access Centres.

New Fees and Fee Enhancements

Appendix D of the 2008 *Physician Services Agreement* between the Ministry and the Ontario Medical Association sets out a range of new fees and fee enhancements available to primary health care family physicians. The Ministry and the Ontario Medical Association are currently finalizing the details for the new incentives.

For further information, please contact the Ministry at 1-866-766-0266.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTONS

Referrals

Q1. What should physicians expect from Care Connectors?

A1. Care Connectors will work to refer patients to physicians using the priority lists generated by the program's database. Care Connectors will contact physicians to inform them of the Health Care Connect program. They will liaise and build relationships with physicians and maintain up-to-date information around provider capacity in their area, practice accessibility, etc.

Physicians can also contact their local Community Care Access Centre directly if they wish to take on new patients from the program.

Q2. How long after registration will the patient receive a letter and how will patients know they have been referred to a physician?

A2. Upon registering in the program, an information kit will be sent to patients outlining Care Connector information, including location and Terms and Conditions of the program. This will be sent out within seven (7) days of registration.

Once a physician has been identified for a patient, a letter will be sent to the patient indicating the referral and directing the patient to make an appointment. A similar letter will be sent to the physician accepting the referral.

The Care Connector will indicate on the program's database when patients have been referred to care. The system will automatically remove patients from the priority list who have been referred to care.

Q3. Will patients be able to indicate a preference for a physician (e.g., could they ask for only a female/male physician)?

A3. The Care Connectors will have information on local physicians in the community in which the patient resides. The Care Connectors will do their best to accommodate patient requests of this nature, where possible, taking into consideration such things as the distance between the patient and physician. However, it may not be possible to meet all such requests and the foremost consideration will be to refer the patient to an available physician.

Q4. What happens if a patient wishes to make a complaint?

A4. If a patient wishes to make a complaint, the situation will be handled in accordance with the Community Care Access Centre's dispute resolution process.

Information officers will also be available to answer questions from registrants and the general public, including the handling of escalated calls from Clinidata and Care Connectors.

Q5. What happens if a patient registered with the Health Care Connect program enrolls with a family physician on his/her own?

A5. Patients are responsible for informing the Care Connector that they have found and enrolled with a family physician on their own while waiting to be referred through the Health Care Connect program. The Care Connector will then remove the patient from the list of patients waiting to be referred.

Q6. I am maintaining my own wait list for my practice. Do I refer those patients to the Health Care Connect program?

A6. If a physician chooses to, he/she can direct patients on their waiting list to register for the Health Care Connect program.

Should patients wish to register for the Health Care Connect program, they will be referred to care according to the priority of their health needs. Care Connectors will attempt to be as flexible as possible to accommodate local arrangements that may already be in place, however, there is no guarantee that patients will be referred to the same physician or practice once they are registered in the program.

APPENDIX A: Clinical Criteria for Adolescents Over 12 Years of Age and Adults

Criteria	Questions for adolescents ≥ 12 years of age and adults
Self-assessed health status	"In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?" (proxy responses acceptable)
Chronic conditions or health problems	"Now I'd like to ask about certain chronic health conditions which you may have. We are interested in 'long term' conditions that have lasted or are expected to last 6 months or more and that have been diagnosed by a doctor or other health professional. Do you have [Yes or No]: ▪ Chronic bronchitis or emphysema? ▪ Diabetes? ▪ Heart disease? ▪ Cancer? Any other long term condition that has been diagnosed by a doctor or other health professional not mentioned above? (arthritis or rheumatism, asthma, back problems, high blood pressure, epilepsy, stroke, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, Crohn's disease or colitis, HIV infection or AIDS, Alzheimer disease or other dementia, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease), multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, cystic fibrosis, hemophilia, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, autism, attention deficit disorder, spina bifida, Down syndrome, food allergies, depression, allergies, migraines, stomach/intestinal ulcers, cataracts,(urinary) incontinence, thyroid problems, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple chemical sensitivities, mood disorders such as bipolar disorder or manic depression, anxiety disorders such as a phobia, developmental disorders, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, alcoholism/substance abuse/addiction (of any kind including gambling), sleep apnea, celiac disease, hypoglycemia)
Activity-limiting disability	"The next few questions deal with any health limitations which affect your daily activities. In these questions, "long-term conditions" refer to conditions that have lasted or are expected to last 6 months or more. Because of a long-term physical or mental condition or a health problem, are you limited in the kind or amount of daily activities you can do ... at home?…at school or at work?…in other activities such as transportation to or from work, school or leisure time activities?"
Mental health	"In general, would say your mental health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?"
Obesity (body mass index)	BMI calculated based on answers from the following two survey questions: ▪ How tall are you? [feet and inches or centimetres] ▪ How much do you weigh? [pounds or kilograms] Note: Not applicable to pregnant women or persons 65 years of age or older.

APPENDIX B: Clinical Criteria for Children Under 12 years of Age

Criteria	Questions for children < 12 years of age
Health status	"In general, would you say your child's health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?"
Chronic conditions or health problems	"Now I'd like to ask about certain chronic health conditions which your child may have. We are interested in 'long term' conditions that have lasted or are expected to last 6 months or more and that have been diagnosed by a doctor or other health professional. Does your child have [Yes or No]: ▪ Asthma? ▪ Diabetes? ▪ Heart disease? ▪ Cancer? Any other long term condition that has been diagnosed by a doctor or other health professional? (cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, hemophilia, Spina bifida, autism, attention deficit disorder, Down syndrome, Crohn's disease or colitis, HIV infection or AIDS, food allergies, depression, allergies, migraines, stomach/intestinal ulcers, (urinary) incontinence, thyroid problems, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple chemical sensitivities, mood disorders such as bipolar disorder, manic depression, anxiety disorders such as a phobia, developmental disorders, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, alcoholism/substance abuse/addiction, celiac disease, hypoglycemia)
Activity-limiting disability	"The next few questions deal with any health limitations which affect your child's daily activities. In these questions, "long-term conditions" refer to conditions that have lasted or are expected to last 6 months or more. Because of a long-term physical or mental condition or a health problem, is your child limited in the kind or amount of activity he/she can do... at home?…at school?…in other activities such as transportation to or from school or leisure time activities?"
Mental health	"In general, would say your child's mental health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?"

APPENDIX C: LHIN Based Care Connectors Contact Information

Central	1-888-470-2222
Central East	1-800-263-3877
Central West	1-888-733-1177
Champlain	1-800-538-0520
Erie St.Clair	1-888-447-4468
Hamilton-Niagara-Haldimand-Brant	1-800-810-0000
Mississauga-Halton	1-877-336-9090
North East	1-800-461-2919
North Simcoe-Muskoka	1-888-721-2222
North West	1-800-626-5406
South East	1-800-869-8828
South West	1-800-811-5146
Toronto Central	1-866-243-0061
Waterloo-Wellington	1-888-883-3313