COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NURSE PRACTITIONER ROLE

- When interpreting data, it is important to remember that the nurse practitioner role is grounded in the nursing profession's values, knowledge, theories and practice, and it is a role that complements, rather than replaces, other health care providers.

- At a time when governments continue to wrestle with the effects of an overburdened health care system, the full integration of nurse practitioners into Canada's health care system can prove instrumental in reducing costs, streamlining the delivery of services and improving the health of Canadians.

- Nurse practitioners work autonomously, initiating the care process, as well as collaboratively with other health care professionals, most often physicians. Nurse practitioners practise in a variety of community, acute care and long-term care settings.

- Research confirms that nurse practitioners improve the public's access to high quality care at cost savings to the system (Feldman et al., 1987; McGrath, 1990; Mundinger, 1994; Mundinger et al., 2000; Kinnersley et al., 2000; Shum et al., 2000). In Ontario, for example, a rigorous evaluation of the clinical nurse specialist/neonatal practitioner role demonstrated that these nurses provide safe, effective, economically efficient care that is accepted by parents of neonates and health provider colleagues (Mitchell-DiCenso et al., 1996).

- Most available cost-effectiveness data are focused on nurse practitioner/physician collaborative primary care models. In such a model, a nurse practitioner and a physician provide primary health care to a group of clients with the two professionals equally sharing authority for providing care within the scope of their practice.

- In a 1985 Council of Ontario Universities study, it was estimated that 40 to 90 per cent of primary care physician visits could be handled by nurse practitioners. A recent Ontario study confirms this estimate, demonstrating that nurse practitioners are capable of handling 82.6 per cent of patient care, with the remainder requiring physician referral (Way, 1999). American research also shows that nurse practitioners manage 80 to 90 per cent of what primary care physicians can do without the need for consultation or referral (Hummel & Pirzada, 1994). What these studies demonstrate is the great improvement in access to primary care when nurse practitioners are utilized.

- Overall, when compared with the cost of physician-only teams, costs of using a physician/nurse practitioner team in a long-term care facility were 42 per cent lower for the intermediate and skilled care residents and 26 per cent lower for those with long-term stays. The study also showed significantly lower rates of emergency room transfers, hospital length of stays and specialty visits for patients covered by physician/nurse practitioner teams (Mundinger, 1994).

- According to data published by the American College of Nurse Practitioners, nurse practitioners cost 40 per cent less than physicians and are particularly cost-effective in administering preventive care with their expertise in counselling, patient/client education and case management (Appleby, 1995).

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that the cost of an office visit to see a nurse practitioner ranged from an estimated 10 per cent to 40 per cent less of the cost for primary care services provided by a physician (Fitzgerald, 1995).
• A 1994 analysis concludes that while a physician and a nurse practitioner may treat a specific acute illness in an identical manner, nurse practitioners evaluate the illness differently, emphasizing disease prevention, health education and health promotion. With this focus, there are long-term cost benefits associated with the nurse practitioner role. In the United States alone, some estimates suggest that up to $8.75 billion US could be saved by fully utilizing nurse practitioners (Mundinger, 1994).

**Key Messages**

• The nurse practitioner role is grounded in the nursing profession's values, knowledge, theories and practice, and it is a role that complements, rather than replaces, other health care providers.

• The nurse practitioner role has the potential to contribute significantly to resolving some of the current health care delivery problems by improving the public's access to high quality care at cost savings to the system.

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**References:**


