

The following statement was delivered by Health Minister Michael Murphy in the New Brunswick Legislature on Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Today, our journey begins.

It begins with the release of our new Provincial Health Plan, which takes effect today.

Over the course of the next four years, our health plan will transform how we think about and access health care in our province.

With this plan, the centre of gravity that began shifting three weeks ago when I announced structural changes to the health system now moves completely away from a system-centred health system to one that's patient-centred.

Mr. Speaker, it is a system that adapts to the needs of patients -- not the other way around.

It's a system where the care you need is as likely to be accessed in your home, school or workplace as in a hospital or doctor's office.

It's a system that addresses the unmet needs we have now in health care while preserving the best of what we already have.

It is a system focused on prevention of disease and illness.

And it is a system that, when disease and illness do strike, will help New Brunswickers better manage their conditions so they live as healthy and as normal a life as possible.

Mr. Speaker, the days of waiting for people to become so sick that their only alternative is an ER or a hospital bed are over.

In short, it is a system that puts the needs of patients first.

And how do we know we'll succeed on this journey to an adaptable, sustainable patients-first health system?

Well, the strength of our plan – the reason that I am so confident -- is the people who contributed to it.

Yes, we heard from many experts from New Brunswick, from across Canada and beyond and without question their knowledge and their advice is reflected in the pages of the health plan and the specific initiatives it contains.

But more importantly, we heard from hundreds – thousands actually -- of everyday people. These are the people who use our health system; who know firsthand its strengths and also its weaknesses.

Personally, I have met with, spoken to or heard from hundreds of New Brunswickers over the last year and a half since I became Minister of Health. Other members of our government have done the same and they have shared those thoughts and experiences with me.

And this is all reflected here in our Health Plan.

Mr. Speaker, there are more than 100 separate initiatives in the health plan that will be carried out over the next four years.

This represents a new investment of more than \$154 million dollars to launch these new or enhanced initiatives.

With this investment, we'll be addressing those things New Brunswickers told us are needed in the health system.

I should point out that New Brunswickers also told us what's good about our publicly-funded health care system – and have no doubt there is much that is good; that works well.

Great health professionals. World-class tertiary programs. We have both. What better resources could you ask for upon which to build and provide even better health care for New Brunswickers?

And we have started this work, Mr. Speaker.

We've begun with the trauma advisory committee we created and which I am confident is going to lead to the establishment of an inclusive, cooperative trauma care system that will be as good as any found elsewhere. When New Brunswickers need this care, it will be there for them.

We've begun with the work of our Cancer Network that over the past year has helped to establish new and enhanced treatment centres across northern New Brunswick. Right now, the Cancer Network is working with our Public Health staff on a vaccination and screening program that will begin this year and will over time dramatically decrease incidences of cervical cancer. What could be more important than reducing cancer?

We've begun with the work of our surgical access network that over the past year has developed the means to electronically track the wait times for all New Brunswickers who need surgery. Over the next year, this information will be available publicly and people can decide if they should have their surgery where it is scheduled or go to another location where it could be done more quickly. This is truly putting the needs of patients first.

So we have a lot to be proud of with the health care we have now – and I heard that over and over from New Brunswickers.

But we also have areas where the needs of New Brunswickers are not being fully or adequately met.

So we have to do more to meet those needs – and we will, through our health plan.

Mr. Speaker, our greatest opportunity for improving New Brunswickers' health and the sustainability of our health-care system lies in helping people to be and stay healthy in the first place.

That's why our health system must evolve from a 'find it and fix it' approach to more of a 'prevent it, find it and manage it' philosophy.

And that's a major focus of our health plan.

We are going to place a much greater emphasis on our children and giving them a healthy start in life. This will involve all of us, including a number of my cabinet colleagues and myself who will be part of a new Cabinet Committee on Childhood Development.

This will begin pre-natal with universal screening for all first-time mothers and continue with a more coordinated effort to identify and address physical, emotional or intellectual challenges our children and youth may face.

Tens of thousands of New Brunswickers with chronic conditions like diabetes, arthritis and asthma also need more of our support. So we'll develop a strategy to provide them with access to the health care professionals who can help them lead healthier, normal lives. We'll give them the information and other support they need to better self-manage their conditions. By doing this we'll improve their quality of life and reduce the biggest cause of hospitalization in our province.

Mr. Speaker, we are going to give mental health and addictions the attention and the services that have until now been lacking.

Achieving our goal of a self-sufficient province requires the participation of all New Brunswickers. No one will be left behind by our government.

So we'll take steps like expanding province-wide an early psychosis intervention program for adolescents and young adults. We know that early intervention leads to significantly improved outcomes in addressing mental illness. And we'll extend our network of mobile crisis response teams to assist people with mental illnesses.

Other new programs and improved training for mental health professionals and other stakeholders will also be part of a new mental health strategy for our province.

Mental illness will finally receive the attention and resources that are needed.

Drug, alcohol and gambling addictions, often in combination, are destroying the lives of many New Brunswickers. Although much media attention is often focused on drug addiction, alcohol addiction remains a significant health challenge for many New Brunswickers. The impact on their lives is similar to that of people battling drug addiction. Relationships are destroyed; holding a job becomes difficult if not impossible; a sense of self-esteem is lost.

So we are adding staff in order to expand in-patient and out-patient programs for people suffering from alcohol addiction. We'll also study the need for an in-patient program that would serve women only.

And we are going to do more to help prevent drug addiction and we are going to provide more help to those who have an addiction. One way we will do this is by expanding methadone treatment to four new areas of our province – St. Stephen, Edmundston, Campbellton and Bathurst. This will allow people to receive care closer to where they live and also address the existing wait list for methadone treatment.

Mr. Speaker, the examples I have given are just a small sample of what is in the health plan.

As I said earlier, we have over 100 separate initiatives that will be undertaken over the course of the four-year plan. We'll invest \$154 million dollars on these new and enhanced initiatives. This doesn't take into account the many millions of dollars more in staff time and other costs associated with developing these initiatives or the on-going operational cost once they begin.

And it doesn't include the \$9 billion or so it will cost to maintain the services we have today over the next four years.

Again, I point out this work will be done over four years. We simply don't have the human resources or the money to do everything that is in the health plan in less time.

In the new fiscal year that begins today, we'll spend more than \$40 million on initiatives that are part of the health plan. We also start work on many more that will be implemented after this year.

All of the initiatives in the health plan are described in the companion document to the main plan, both of which I tabled earlier and which are also posted on my department's website.

Mr. Speaker, I won't try to cover every initiative here today but I do want to go over a few.

The availability of health human resources is an on-going issue here just as it is in all jurisdictions. We have to be competitive in the incentives we offer physicians, nurses and other health professionals, and we will be.

But is going to take more than an open wallet to ensure New Brunswickers have the care they need, when they need it.

So we are going to be inventive. We'll make sure health care providers can work to the full scope of their training. Initially, this means giving pharmacists the ability to prescribe certain medications. It means adding midwives to our publicly funded team of health providers so as to improve women's access to professional care during and after a pregnancy.

We'll also be adding at least 100 new billing numbers for doctors over the next four years as well as 40 more Nurse Practitioners.

We'll be establishing six new Community Health Centres as part of a new strategy to improve access to primary health care.

We are going to index the income level at which seniors qualify for the province's prescription drug program. Initially, this will allow an estimated 2,200 additional seniors to qualify for the program once implemented.

We are going to continue to develop our e-health strategy, including the *One Patient One Record* electronic health record. Doing so will improve patient care, reduce duplication of tests and provide information needed to make better informed decisions on how our health system needs to further adapt to put the needs of patients first.

Mr. Speaker, when I started, I said our journey begins today – and it does.

The new Provincial Health Plan is not the end but just the beginning of a journey that will shape health care for future generations of New Brunswickers.

We set the stage for this journey to succeed with the recent structural changes in our health system. The move to two Regional Health Authorities and the consolidation of a number of non-clinical services under a new public company will help create a more efficient and sustainable public health system.

The new Health Council will give New Brunswickers opportunities to shape health care that have not existed before. They'll also be better informed of what's working – and what isn't – in their health-care system. This public scrutiny will drive further improvement in clinical care. It will further inform us of where we need to be investing resources to meet the needs of New Brunswickers. Conversely, it may tell us where we are investing money with little return for patients and their needs.

So these structural changes, along with the improvements in clinical services in our health plan, have launched us on our journey.

It's a journey that will allow us to preserve the best of what our health system offers and to strengthen those areas where New Brunswickers have told me we are not meeting their needs or those of their children.

There will be bumps along this road – of this there is no doubt – but we won't lose track of our destination – a sustainable, patient-focused system that allows all of us to be healthy in New Brunswick.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.