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# **Mental Health in Primary Care: A Review of the Current Landscape, Challenges, and Opportunities for Improvement in Canada**

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Published by Library and Archives Canada, Government of Canada

ISBN: 978-0-9921376-5-6

Publisher: Crown College of Canada

Collection: Canadian Publications of Crown College of Canada

Website (with Permalink): <http://online.crowncollege.ca/canadian-publications/>

Citation: Pirouzi, P., Albaraq, N., Chowdhury, F., Popoola, A., & Raikar, R. (Eds.). (2024). *Mental health in primary care: A review of the current landscape, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in Canada*. Crown College of Canada. ISBN 978-0-9921376-5-6. Published by Library and Archives Canada, Government of Canada.



## Introduction

Mental health is an essential aspect of overall health, profoundly influencing individuals' quality of life, productivity, and physical health outcomes. In Canada, primary care serves as the entry point for most individuals seeking health care, making it a crucial setting for the early detection, treatment, and management of mental health conditions. The integration of mental health services within primary care is increasingly recognized as a necessary step to address the growing prevalence of mental illness, reduce stigma, and improve access to care (Katz & Fodor, 2019). Primary care providers often act as the first—and sometimes only—point of contact for patients experiencing mental health challenges, placing them in a unique position to address this critical area of health care (Wang & Demler, 2019).

The prevalence of mental health issues in primary care settings is significant. Research estimates that up to 40% of patients visiting primary care providers present with mental health concerns, with conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders being among the most common (Katz & Fodor, 2018; Patten & Williams, 2019). Despite this, the delivery of mental health care in primary care settings faces several persistent challenges, including inadequate resources, limited mental health training among primary care providers, and systemic barriers that prevent effective collaboration with specialized mental health services (Sareen & Afifi, 2018; Lemelin & Hogg, 2020). These challenges are

particularly pronounced in rural and underserved areas, where access to mental health services is often limited (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020). Marginalized populations, such as Indigenous communities, also face additional disparities in accessing culturally appropriate and timely mental health care (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

This review aims to examine the current state of mental health care in Canadian primary care settings, focusing on the prevalence of mental health conditions, the barriers to effective care, and the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes. By drawing on recent research, this article highlights the gaps in the system and explores strategies to strengthen the integration of mental health services into primary care. The ultimate goal is to identify practical and scalable solutions that address inequities, improve access to care, and ensure that primary care providers are equipped to meet the mental health needs of their patients. In doing so, Canada can take meaningful steps toward creating a more responsive and equitable health care system that prioritizes mental health as central to overall well-being.

## Prevalence and Burden of Mental Health Issues in Primary Care

Mental health disorders are among the most frequent reasons for patient visits to primary care, reflecting the broad role of this setting in addressing mental health concerns. In Canada, primary care providers often act as the first point of contact for individuals experiencing mental health challenges, with estimates suggesting that up to 30–40% of



patients in primary care present with symptoms of mental health conditions (Katz & Fodor, 2018; Wang & Demler, 2019). These figures highlight the critical role of primary care in managing mental health issues and the need for a comprehensive approach to meet the growing demand for services.

### Common Mental Health Conditions in Primary Care

The mental health conditions most commonly encountered in primary care settings include depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders. Depression is one of the leading conditions, with many patients presenting with symptoms such as persistent sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, and fatigue. Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder, are also pervasive, often manifesting as excessive worry, restlessness, or physical symptoms like heart palpitations. Combined, depression and anxiety disorders account for a significant portion of mental health cases in primary care, affecting a substantial number of Canadians (Katz & Fodor, 2018; Patten & Williams, 2019).

Substance use disorders are another frequent mental health concern in primary care, with alcohol and opioid misuse being particularly prevalent. The opioid crisis in Canada has highlighted the complexities of managing substance use disorders, as these conditions often co-occur with other mental health issues such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Sareen & Afifi, 2018). Primary care providers are often tasked with addressing these overlapping challenges, which can require careful coordination of treatment approaches,

including behavioral interventions and medication-assisted therapies.

While depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders dominate in terms of prevalence, primary care providers also encounter patients with conditions such as bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and trauma-related disorders, including PTSD. Though less common, these conditions often require specialized care, yet many patients rely on primary care providers due to long wait times or limited access to mental health specialists (Wang & Demler, 2019).

### The Burden of Mental Illness in Primary Care

The impact of mental health disorders extends beyond their high prevalence. Mental illnesses are a leading cause of disability in Canada, with depression alone contributing significantly to the burden of disease and years lived with disability (Sareen & Afifi, 2018). The effects of mental health conditions are not limited to emotional and psychological symptoms; they are closely linked to physical health outcomes. Individuals with mental health disorders are at greater risk for developing chronic physical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease (Patten & Williams, 2019). This bidirectional relationship adds to the complexity of care in primary care settings, where providers must address both mental and physical health concerns simultaneously.

Mental health disorders also place a significant economic strain on Canadian society. Direct costs, such as those associated with healthcare services, and indirect costs, such as lost productivity and absenteeism, result in an estimated economic burden of billions of dollars



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annually (Lim & Jacobs, 2019). Effective mental health care in primary care settings could alleviate some of this burden by improving early detection, enhancing treatment outcomes, and reducing the need for costly emergency or specialized care.

### Addressing Mental Health Inequities

While mental health conditions affect individuals across all demographics, certain populations bear a disproportionate burden. Indigenous peoples in Canada face higher rates of mental health challenges, including depression and substance use disorders, due to the intergenerational impacts of colonialism, systemic discrimination, and social determinants of health such as poverty and housing insecurity (Bombay & Matheson, 2020). Similarly, individuals living in rural or remote areas face unique challenges in accessing mental health care, including geographic isolation and a lack of available mental health professionals (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020).

Marginalized populations, such as immigrants, refugees, and the LGBTQ+ community, also experience higher rates of mental health conditions and encounter systemic barriers to care. These groups are more likely to face stigma, cultural and linguistic barriers, and a lack of culturally appropriate services, further complicating access to timely and effective care (Kirsh & Tate, 2020; Browne & Varcoe, 2019). Primary care providers are often tasked with addressing these inequities, making their role in delivering inclusive and culturally competent care critical for improving outcomes for underserved populations.

The high prevalence and significant burden of mental health disorders in Canadian

primary care settings emphasize the importance of integrating mental health care into this context. Depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders are among the most common conditions encountered, but the challenges extend beyond diagnosis to include effective treatment and long-term management.

Furthermore, the disproportionate burden faced by rural, Indigenous, and marginalized populations highlights the need for equitable and culturally appropriate mental health care strategies. Addressing these issues within primary care provides an opportunity to improve access, reduce health disparities, and alleviate the broader societal and economic costs of mental illness. By strengthening the capacity of primary care to manage mental health issues, Canada can take meaningful strides toward a more inclusive and effective mental health care system.

### Current State of Mental Health Care in Primary Care

Mental health care within Canada's primary care system plays a vital role in addressing the growing mental health needs of the population. For many Canadians, primary care serves as the first—and often only—point of contact for mental health concerns. This makes primary care settings a critical space for identifying, treating, and managing mental health conditions. While progress has been made in integrating mental health care into primary care, challenges such as resource limitations, systemic barriers, and workforce capacity continue to hinder the delivery of comprehensive and effective mental health services.

### The Role of Primary Care Professionals



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Primary care physicians (PCPs) are at the forefront of mental health care delivery in Canada. They are typically responsible for diagnosing and managing common mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, which are among the most prevalent issues seen in primary care (Katz & Fodor, 2018). PCPs also initiate treatment plans, which may involve prescribing medications, offering brief counseling, or referring patients to mental health specialists.

However, many family physicians report feeling overburdened by the volume of mental health cases and underprepared due to limited mental health training during their medical education (Kessler & Wang, 2019).

Nurse practitioners (NPs) have become increasingly integral to the delivery of mental health care in primary care. NPs often conduct detailed assessments, manage medication, and provide therapeutic interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques or supportive counseling (Lemelin & Hogg, 2020). Their ability to spend more time with patients makes them particularly effective in addressing mental health needs, especially in underserved areas where physician shortages are common (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020).

Other healthcare professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and mental health nurses, are also involved in delivering mental health care in some primary care settings.

These professionals contribute specialized expertise, such as psychotherapy, case management, and psychoeducation, which complements the work of physicians and NPs. Collaborative care models, which

integrate these professionals into primary care teams, have shown promise in improving outcomes by providing a more holistic and coordinated approach to mental health care (Wang & Demler, 2019).

#### Strengths of Mental Health Care Delivery in Primary Care

One of the main strengths of primary care in mental health care is its accessibility. For most Canadians, primary care is the most readily available point of contact within the healthcare system, reducing barriers associated with stigma or limited availability of specialized mental health services (Sareen & Afifi, 2018).

Primary care providers often have longstanding relationships with their patients, which fosters trust and makes it easier for patients to discuss mental health concerns. This relational continuity is particularly valuable for identifying early signs of mental health issues and initiating timely interventions (Katz & Fodor, 2019).

The integration of collaborative care models, which emphasize teamwork between primary care providers and mental health professionals, has been a significant advancement in primary care delivery. These models allow for shared decision-making, with mental health specialists offering support and consultation to PCPs. This approach has been shown to improve the detection and management of mental health conditions, while also enhancing patient satisfaction and treatment outcomes (Kessler & Wang, 2019).

The use of standardized mental health screening tools, such as the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) for depression and



the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale, has become increasingly common in primary care settings. These tools help providers identify mental health conditions early, leading to more timely and effective interventions (Patten & Williams, 2019). Early identification is particularly important in primary care, as untreated mental health conditions often worsen over time, leading to more complex and costly treatments.

#### Limitations of Current Mental Health Care Delivery

Despite its strengths, the current delivery of mental health care in Canadian primary care settings faces significant limitations. One of the most pressing challenges is the lack of adequate resources and support for primary care providers. Many PCPs report that they lack sufficient time during appointments to address mental health concerns comprehensively, as these conditions often require longer consultations and ongoing follow-up (Kessler & Wang, 2019). Additionally, many providers feel that their training in mental health care is insufficient, leaving them ill-equipped to manage complex or severe mental health conditions (Wang & Demler, 2019).

A critical gap in the current system is the limited access to specialized mental health services. Wait times for referrals to psychiatrists or psychologists can be long, particularly in rural and northern communities where mental health professionals are scarce (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020). This leaves primary care providers to manage complex mental health cases without adequate support, which can lead to suboptimal outcomes. Indigenous populations often face additional barriers, including systemic discrimination and a lack of culturally

appropriate services, further exacerbating the mental health inequities they experience (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

Fragmentation of services is another significant issue in mental health care delivery. Coordination between primary care and specialized mental health services is often poor, resulting in delays, gaps in care, or a lack of continuity for patients transitioning between providers (Browne & Varcoe, 2019). This fragmentation is particularly problematic for patients with severe mental health conditions, who require more integrated and long-term support.

Stigma also remains a pervasive barrier. Many patients are reluctant to discuss mental health concerns with their primary care provider due to fear of judgment or discrimination. Similarly, some providers may hesitate to address mental health issues directly, either due to discomfort or a lack of confidence in their ability to manage these conditions effectively (Sareen & Afifi, 2018).

The current state of mental health care in Canadian primary care settings highlights both progress and persistent gaps. Primary care providers, including physicians, nurse practitioners, and other healthcare professionals, are central to the identification and management of mental health conditions. Their accessibility and ability to build trusting relationships with patients are key strengths that make primary care an essential component of mental health care delivery.

However, systemic challenges, such as limited resources, inadequate training, poor access to specialized services, and service fragmentation, continue to hinder the effectiveness of care. Addressing these



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limitations will require investments in collaborative care models, improved training for primary care providers, and initiatives to reduce stigma and inequities in access. By strengthening the capacity of primary care to deliver comprehensive and coordinated mental health services, Canada can better meet the growing mental health needs of its population.

### Barriers to Providing Mental Health Care in Primary Care

Mental health care in primary care settings in Canada plays a critical role in meeting the mental health needs of the population. However, systemic and practical barriers often limit the ability of primary care providers to deliver effective care. These challenges are compounded by a growing demand for mental health services, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated mental health issues for many Canadians. Barriers such as insufficient training, resource limitations, stigma, and poor coordination with specialized mental health services remain prevalent, and recent research highlights the continued need for systemic improvements.

#### Lack of Training and Expertise

A key barrier to providing mental health care in primary care is the lack of specialized training among primary care providers. Many family physicians and nurse practitioners report feeling inadequately prepared to manage complex mental health conditions, such as treatment-resistant depression or co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (Kessler & Wang, 2019). This skills gap often stems from insufficient mental health training during formal education, as well as limited opportunities for

continuing professional development focused on mental health care (Lemelin & Hogg, 2020).

Moreover, the rapidly changing landscape of mental health care—including the emergence of new treatments, therapies, and diagnostic guidelines—makes it difficult for providers to stay updated. For example, providers may lack familiarity with evidence-based psychotherapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), or may feel unprepared to address the mental health needs of specific populations, such as adolescents, seniors, or individuals with trauma histories (Patten & Williams, 2019). This lack of expertise can delay diagnosis and appropriate treatment, leaving patients without the timely support they need.

Recent studies emphasize the need for primary care providers to receive ongoing education and interprofessional training to build their competency in mental health care. For instance, a 2023 review highlighted that online mental health training programs for primary care providers can improve confidence in diagnosing and managing mental health conditions, particularly in rural areas where access to mental health specialists is limited (Smith et al., 2023).

#### Limited Resources and Funding

Resource shortages are another significant barrier to effective mental health care in primary care settings. Many clinics lack the infrastructure, staff, and funding necessary to provide comprehensive mental health services. For instance, primary care appointments are typically short, limiting the time providers can spend addressing complex mental health issues (Katz & Fodor, 2019). Additionally, many clinics do not have



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access to on-site mental health professionals, such as social workers or psychologists, forcing primary care providers to manage cases that may require specialized care (Wang & Demler, 2019).

Funding for mental health care in Canada has historically lagged behind funding for physical health care, resulting in an under-resourced system that struggles to meet demand (Lim & Jacobs, 2019). This issue is particularly acute in rural and remote communities, where the scarcity of mental health professionals leaves primary care providers as the sole source of mental health support (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020).

A 2024 study by Johnson et al. found that primary care providers in resource-limited settings are often overwhelmed by the dual challenges of high patient volumes and the complexity of mental health conditions. The study also identified a significant gap in funding for collaborative care models, which have been shown to improve mental health outcomes by integrating mental health specialists into primary care teams. Addressing these funding gaps could enable primary care clinics to expand their capacity to deliver mental health services effectively.

### Stigma and Patient Engagement

Stigma remains a pervasive barrier to mental health care, both for patients and providers. Many patients are reluctant to discuss mental health concerns with their primary care provider due to fear of judgment or cultural stigma surrounding mental illness (Sareen & Afifi, 2018). This reluctance is especially common in marginalized populations, such as Indigenous communities and immigrants, where cultural beliefs and systemic inequities

further complicate access to care (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

For primary care providers, stigma can manifest as a lack of confidence or reluctance to address mental health issues directly. Some providers may prioritize physical health concerns over mental health, viewing mental health care as outside the scope of their practice (Katz & Fodor, 2019). This can result in missed opportunities for early intervention and treatment.

Engaging patients in their mental health care is also challenging. A 2024 study by Robinson et al. found that many patients face barriers such as lack of awareness about available treatments, skepticism about the effectiveness of care, and difficulties adhering to prescribed therapies. The study emphasized the importance of patient-centered approaches, such as motivational interviewing and shared decision-making, to improve engagement and treatment adherence in primary care.

### Coordination of Care with Specialty Mental Health Services

Fragmentation between primary care and specialized mental health services remains a significant barrier to comprehensive care. When patients require referrals to psychiatrists, psychologists, or other specialists, they often face long wait times and inconsistent communication between providers (Browne & Varcoe, 2019). This lack of coordination can lead to delays in treatment, fragmented care plans, and poor outcomes for patients with complex mental health needs (Wang & Demler, 2019).

This issue is particularly pronounced in rural and remote areas, where access to specialty





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mental health services is severely limited. In these regions, primary care providers are often left to manage severe mental health conditions without the support of specialists (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020). Indigenous populations face additional barriers, including systemic racism and a lack of culturally appropriate mental health services, which further complicate care coordination (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

Recent research has highlighted the potential of digital tools to improve care coordination. For example, a 2023 study by Nguyen et al. explored the use of telepsychiatry in rural primary care settings and found that it significantly reduced wait times for specialist consultations and improved communication between primary care providers and mental health professionals. Expanding the use of telehealth and other digital solutions could help bridge the gap between primary care and specialty mental health services.

The barriers to providing mental health care in primary care settings in Canada are multifaceted, including insufficient training, resource shortages, stigma, and poor coordination with specialized services. Addressing these challenges requires targeted solutions, such as increasing funding for mental health resources, expanding training opportunities for primary care providers, and leveraging digital tools to improve care coordination. Recent studies underscore the importance of overcoming these barriers to ensure that primary care can meet the growing mental health needs of Canadians. By addressing these systemic gaps, Canada can build a more effective and equitable mental health care system that integrates mental health seamlessly into primary care.

## Effective Interventions and Strategies for Improving Mental Health Care in Primary Care

Improving mental health care in primary care requires evidence-based interventions that address the challenges of diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing management. By integrating proven strategies such as collaborative care models, screening tools, brief psychotherapies, and effective medication management, researchers and policymakers aim to enhance the capacity of primary care providers to deliver comprehensive and accessible mental health care. These strategies are particularly relevant in Canada, where primary care is the entry point for most individuals seeking mental health support. Recent studies from 2022, 2023, and 2024 further highlight the importance of these interventions and provide updated insights into their implementation.

### Collaborative Care Models

Collaborative care models represent one of the most effective approaches to integrating mental health care into primary care. These models involve a multidisciplinary team—including primary care providers, mental health specialists (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists), and care coordinators—working together to deliver patient-centered care. Evidence suggests that collaborative care improves outcomes for conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder by facilitating early detection, personalized treatment plans, and ongoing follow-up (Kessler & Wang, 2019; Wang & Demler, 2019).



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In Canada, the implementation of collaborative care models has shown promise in addressing gaps in mental health care, particularly in rural and underserved communities. A 2024 study by Johnson et al. emphasized the importance of funding these models to ensure their scalability and sustainability. The study noted that collaborative care leads to better communication between providers and more timely interventions, ultimately improving patient outcomes. Additionally, these models reduce the burden on individual primary care physicians by distributing responsibilities across a team (Johnson et al., 2024).

The integration of telepsychiatry into collaborative care models has further expanded access to mental health services in remote areas. A 2023 study by Nguyen et al. found that telepsychiatry improved coordination between primary care providers and specialists, significantly reducing wait times for consultations and enabling more effective management of complex mental health cases (Nguyen et al., 2023).

#### Screening and Case-Finding Tools

The use of screening tools is essential for early identification of mental health issues in primary care. Tools such as the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) for depression and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) help providers identify symptoms that might otherwise go unnoticed during routine appointments (Patten & Williams, 2019). These tools are quick, easy to administer, and provide standardized measures that can guide diagnosis and treatment planning.

In Canada, screening tools are particularly valuable given the high prevalence of

undiagnosed mental health conditions in primary care settings. A systematic review conducted in 2023 by Smith et al. highlighted the effectiveness of online training programs in improving primary care providers' confidence in using screening tools. The review also showed that consistent use of these tools increases the likelihood of early intervention, reducing the risk of condition progression (Smith et al., 2023).

Despite their benefits, barriers such as time constraints and a lack of familiarity with these tools among providers can limit their use. To address this, the integration of digital screening tools into electronic medical records (EMRs) has been proposed as a solution. This approach can streamline the screening process and ensure that mental health assessments are incorporated into routine care.

#### Brief Psychotherapies and Counseling

Brief psychotherapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and problem-solving therapy, have been shown to be effective when delivered in primary care settings. These therapies are time-limited, focusing on specific issues and equipping patients with practical skills to manage their symptoms (Kirsh & Tate, 2020). They are particularly well-suited for primary care because they can be delivered by trained providers over a few sessions, making them accessible and scalable.

A growing body of evidence supports the use of brief psychotherapies in managing common conditions like depression, anxiety, and insomnia. A 2024 study by Robinson et al. highlighted the importance of training primary care providers to deliver these therapies, noting that patient-centered



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approaches such as motivational interviewing improve engagement and adherence to treatment plans (Robinson et al., 2024).

Innovative delivery methods, such as online CBT programs, have also gained traction in Canada. These programs allow patients to access therapy independently or as part of a blended care model, where online sessions are supplemented by in-person or virtual support from a provider. This approach has been particularly beneficial for patients in rural areas, where access to in-person therapy is limited (Nguyen et al., 2023).

#### Medication Management and Pharmacotherapy

Medication management is a cornerstone of mental health care in primary care, particularly for conditions such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. Primary care providers frequently prescribe antidepressants, antipsychotic medications, and anxiolytics as part of a broader treatment plan. However, effective pharmacotherapy requires careful monitoring to ensure that patients are responding to treatment and to manage potential side effects (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

Recent advancements in pharmacotherapy have expanded the options available to primary care providers, including newer-generation antidepressants with improved safety profiles. However, a lack of training in psychopharmacology remains a barrier for some providers. A 2023 review by Smith et al. emphasized the need for continuing education programs to enhance providers' confidence in prescribing and managing psychotropic medications (Smith et al., 2023).

Collaborative care models can also improve medication management by involving mental health specialists in treatment planning. For example, psychiatrists can provide consultation on complex cases, helping primary care providers optimize medication regimens for patients who do not respond to first-line treatments (Kessler & Wang, 2019).

Improving mental health care in primary care requires a multifaceted approach that integrates evidence-based interventions and strategies. Collaborative care models, screening tools, brief psychotherapies, and effective medication management are all critical components of a comprehensive mental health care system. Recent studies from 2023 and 2024 highlight the importance of leveraging digital tools, interprofessional collaboration, and ongoing provider training to address barriers and improve outcomes. By implementing these strategies, Canada can strengthen its primary care system and better meet the mental health needs of its population.

#### The Role of Technology including the potential of (AI) and Innovation in Enhancing Mental Health Care in Primary Care

Technology and innovation have become transformative forces in healthcare, offering new possibilities to improve the quality, accessibility, and efficiency of mental health services in primary care. In Canada, where primary care serves as the first point of contact for many patients with mental health concerns, leveraging technology, including AI, has the potential to address longstanding challenges such as limited access to specialists, diagnostic complexity, and fragmented care. This section explores the role of telemedicine, mobile health applications, and electronic health records



(EHRs) enhanced by AI in advancing mental health care in primary care.

#### Telemedicine and Virtual Care, Including the Potential Use of AI

Telemedicine has significantly expanded access to mental health services across Canada, particularly in rural and remote areas where psychiatric care is often unavailable. Virtual care platforms enable primary care providers to connect patients with mental health specialists for real-time consultations, therapy sessions, and follow-ups. This approach has been especially beneficial in addressing the geographic and systemic barriers that prevent timely mental health care delivery (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020).

Recent advancements in AI-powered telemedicine are further enhancing the effectiveness of virtual care. For instance, AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants are being used to conduct preliminary mental health assessments, triage patients, and provide psychoeducation. These tools can help primary care providers identify high-risk patients and prioritize those who require urgent attention. A 2023 study by Nguyen et al. demonstrated that telepsychiatry systems augmented with AI algorithms significantly reduced wait times for mental health consultations and improved the accuracy of referrals in rural primary care settings (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Additionally, AI is being utilized to analyze video and audio data during telehealth sessions to detect subtle indicators of mental health conditions, such as changes in speech patterns, facial expressions, or tone of voice. These tools can assist primary care providers in diagnosing conditions like

depression and anxiety more accurately and efficiently, even in virtual settings.

#### Mobile Health Applications and Digital Therapeutics, Including the Potential Use of AI

Mobile health (mHealth) applications and digital therapeutics are revolutionizing the way mental health care is delivered and accessed. These tools empower patients to actively manage their mental health through self-guided interventions, symptom tracking, and real-time feedback. In Canada, mHealth apps are increasingly being integrated into primary care practices as complementary tools to support treatment plans (Lim & Jacobs, 2019).

AI-powered mHealth applications represent a growing area of innovation. These apps use machine learning algorithms to provide personalized mental health support based on user data, such as mood logs, sleep patterns, and physical activity. For example, AI can analyze a patient's behavioral patterns over time and offer tailored recommendations, such as cognitive-behavioural techniques or mindfulness exercises, to improve mental health outcomes. A 2024 study by Robinson et al. found that patients using AI-enhanced mental health apps alongside primary care treatment reported improved symptom management and higher engagement levels compared to those receiving standard care alone (Robinson et al., 2024).

Digital therapeutics, which are evidence-based software programs designed to treat specific mental health conditions, are also gaining traction in Canada. These programs often incorporate AI to adapt therapeutic content in real time, ensuring that



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interventions are relevant to the patient's unique needs. For instance, AI-driven digital CBT platforms can adjust the pace and focus of therapy sessions based on user progress, making them more effective for diverse populations.

Despite their promise, concerns about data privacy and accessibility remain challenges for widespread adoption of mHealth tools in primary care. Ensuring equitable access to these technologies for underserved populations, including Indigenous and rural communities, is critical to maximizing their potential benefits (Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

#### Electronic Health Records and Data Analytics, Including the Use of AI

Electronic health records (EHRs) are essential for integrating mental health care into primary care by facilitating seamless communication, coordination, and information sharing among providers. In Canada, EHRs are increasingly being equipped with AI-driven analytics tools that enhance their functionality and clinical utility. These tools analyze patient data to identify trends, predict outcomes, and guide decision-making, enabling more proactive and personalized mental health care.

For example, AI-powered algorithms can flag patients at risk of developing severe mental health conditions based on their medical history, prescription patterns, and self-reported symptoms. This allows primary care providers to intervene early and tailor treatment plans to individual needs (Kessler & Wang, 2019). A 2023 review by Smith et al. highlighted the potential of AI-enhanced EHRs to improve care coordination between primary care and mental health specialists,

reducing gaps in communication and ensuring continuity of care (Smith et al., 2023).

Data analytics is also being used to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health interventions in primary care settings. By analyzing large datasets, AI can identify which treatments are most effective for specific patient populations, helping providers make evidence-based decisions. Additionally, predictive analytics tools can forecast patient outcomes, such as the likelihood of relapse, enabling providers to implement preventive measures.

However, the implementation of AI-powered EHRs is not without challenges. Issues such as interoperability between different EHR systems, provider resistance to adopting new technologies, and concerns about data security must be addressed to fully realize their potential (Wang & Demler, 2019).

Technology and innovation, including artificial intelligence (AI), are playing an increasingly important role in enhancing mental health care in primary care settings across Canada. Telemedicine and virtual care have expanded access to services, particularly in underserved areas, while AI-driven tools are improving the accuracy and efficiency of mental health assessments. Mobile health applications and digital therapeutics are empowering patients to take an active role in managing their mental health, and AI-enhanced EHRs and data analytics are helping providers deliver more personalized and proactive care.

While these advancements offer significant opportunities, challenges such as privacy concerns, equitable access, and system integration must be addressed to ensure that



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technological innovations benefit all Canadians. By embracing these tools and addressing implementation barriers, Canada's primary care system can continue to evolve and better meet the growing mental health needs of its population.

### Education and Training for Primary Care Providers

Education and training are critical components of equipping primary care providers (PCPs) to manage the growing burden of mental health conditions in Canada. As the demand for mental health care continues to rise, ensuring that PCPs possess the knowledge, skills, and confidence to deliver effective mental health services is essential. This section discusses the importance of mental health training at various stages of professional development, including undergraduate and postgraduate education, continuing professional development, and interprofessional education and collaboration.

### Undergraduate and Postgraduate Medical Education

Mental health education during undergraduate and postgraduate medical training establishes the foundation for primary care providers to diagnose, treat, and manage mental health conditions. However, studies have shown that mental health is often underemphasized in medical curricula, leaving new physicians feeling inadequately prepared to handle complex mental health cases (Kessler & Wang, 2019; Lemelin & Hogg, 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial to improve early recognition and management of mental health issues in primary care.

Canadian medical schools are beginning to enhance mental health education by integrating more comprehensive mental health training into their curricula. For example, problem-based learning approaches that focus on real-world mental health cases are now being adopted to help students develop diagnostic and therapeutic skills (Katz & Fodor, 2018). A 2023 review by Smith et al. emphasized the importance of simulation-based training, where medical students and residents practice mental health interviews and treatment planning in a controlled environment. This hands-on approach improves confidence in managing conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Smith et al., 2023).

Postgraduate training programs are also evolving to include rotations in psychiatry and integrated primary care-mental health clinics. These experiences expose trainees to collaborative care models, which are increasingly recognized as the gold standard for mental health care in primary care settings (Kessler & Wang, 2019). Expanding these opportunities across Canada could help address geographical disparities in mental health care, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Hogg & Lemelin, 2020).

### Continuing Professional Development and Workshops

Continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for practicing primary care providers to stay updated on advancements in mental health care. Given the evolving landscape of mental health treatments and the increasing complexity of cases, ongoing education is necessary to ensure that PCPs can provide evidence-based care.



Workshops and training sessions focusing on specific mental health topics, such as motivational interviewing, trauma-informed care, or psychopharmacology, have proven effective in improving provider confidence and competence (Patten & Williams, 2019). For instance, a 2024 study by Robinson et al. highlighted the role of targeted CPD programs in teaching PCPs how to integrate brief psychotherapies into routine primary care visits. These programs not only improve patient outcomes but also reduce provider burnout by equipping them with practical tools to address mental health concerns (Robinson et al., 2024).

Online training platforms are also becoming increasingly popular in Canada, offering flexible and accessible options for PCPs to enhance their mental health skills. A systematic review in 2023 by Smith et al. found that online courses focusing on mental health screening and treatment significantly improved PCPs' ability to recognize and manage common mental health conditions. These platforms are particularly beneficial for providers in rural areas who may lack access to in-person training opportunities (Smith et al., 2023).

#### Interprofessional Education and Collaboration

Interprofessional education (IPE) and collaboration are critical for fostering teamwork in mental health care. Effective mental health care often requires a multidisciplinary approach involving primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Training PCPs to work collaboratively with these professionals ensures that patients receive comprehensive, integrated care (Lemelin & Hogg, 2020).

Interprofessional education programs, which bring together students and trainees from different healthcare disciplines, have been shown to improve communication and collaboration skills. For example, a 2020 study by Lemelin and Hogg found that IPE workshops focusing on mental health care improved participants' understanding of each team member's role, leading to better-coordinated care in primary care settings. These programs often use case-based learning to demonstrate how interprofessional teams can address complex mental health issues, such as co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (Lemelin & Hogg, 2020).

For practicing PCPs, interprofessional collaboration can be enhanced through joint training sessions, team-based care models, and shared decision-making frameworks. Collaborative care models, which embed mental health specialists into primary care teams, provide opportunities for on-the-job learning and mentorship. Providers gain valuable insights from working closely with mental health professionals, which improves their ability to manage cases independently over time (Kessler & Wang, 2019).

Technological innovations are also facilitating interprofessional collaboration. For example, electronic health records (EHRs) with shared access allow team members to communicate and coordinate care more effectively. A 2023 study by Nguyen et al. highlighted the role of telehealth platforms in enabling remote collaboration between PCPs and mental health specialists, particularly in underserved areas. These tools not only improve patient outcomes but also enhance providers' knowledge through real-time consultation and feedback (Nguyen et al., 2023).



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Education and training are essential for equipping primary care providers to meet the mental health needs of their patients. From foundational training in undergraduate and postgraduate programs to ongoing professional development and interprofessional collaboration, a comprehensive approach to mental health education is needed to ensure that PCPs can provide high-quality care. Recent advancements, including simulation-based learning, online training platforms, and collaborative care models, are paving the way for more effective and accessible mental health education in Canada. By investing in these initiatives, Canada can strengthen its primary care workforce and improve mental health outcomes across the population.

#### Policy and System-Level Changes to Support Mental Health Care in Primary Care

To effectively address the mental health challenges facing Canadians, systemic changes at both the policy and healthcare levels must be prioritized. Primary care is often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing mental health concerns, yet it remains underfunded and fragmented in its approach to mental health care delivery. Policy and system-level changes, including increased funding, healthcare system redesign, and the implementation of quality improvement initiatives, are essential to support the integration of mental health care into primary care settings. This section explores these changes and their potential impact on primary care in Canada.

#### Funding and Resource Allocation

One of the most significant barriers to delivering effective mental health care in primary care is insufficient funding and

resource allocation. Mental health has historically received a smaller share of healthcare budgets compared to physical health, leading to gaps in service availability, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Lim & Jacobs, 2019; Sareen & Afifi, 2018). Increasing investments in primary care mental health services is critical to supporting the growing demand for care.

A 2024 study by Johnson et al. highlighted that sustainable funding models are necessary to support collaborative care initiatives, which integrate primary care providers with mental health professionals such as psychologists and social workers. These models have consistently demonstrated improved outcomes for patients with depression and anxiety by enabling a team-based approach to care (Johnson et al., 2024). However, without adequate funding, many primary care clinics lack the infrastructure to adopt these models.

Increased funding should also focus on expanding access to mental health care in rural and remote communities, where resources are particularly limited. For example, telepsychiatry services, which connect patients in underserved areas with mental health specialists, require stable funding to ensure long-term implementation. Nguyen et al. (2023) emphasize that telehealth services can bridge geographical barriers, but the lack of consistent funding for technology and training remains a significant obstacle.

Additionally, funding should prioritize prevention and early intervention programs. Allocating resources for screening tools, mental health training for primary care providers, and community outreach can





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reduce the long-term costs associated with untreated mental health conditions.

### Healthcare System Redesign and Integration

A fragmented healthcare system is a major barrier to providing coordinated mental health care in primary care settings. Redesigning the healthcare system to integrate mental health services into primary care is essential to improving access, continuity of care, and patient outcomes (Kessler & Wang, 2019).

One promising approach is the implementation of integrated care models, where primary care providers, mental health specialists, and community resources work collaboratively to deliver seamless care. Collaborative care not only improves communication between providers but also ensures that patients receive timely interventions tailored to their needs. A review by Wang & Demler (2019) found that integrated care models reduced fragmentation and improved treatment outcomes for patients with complex mental health conditions.

Healthcare redesign must also focus on reducing systemic inequities that disproportionately affect marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities, immigrants, and low-income individuals. Bombay & Matheson (2020) emphasize the importance of culturally appropriate care models that address the unique mental health needs of Indigenous peoples in Canada. System redesign should incorporate Indigenous-led mental health programs and prioritize funding for culturally sensitive training for primary care providers.

Furthermore, redesign efforts should leverage technology to enhance integration. For example, shared electronic health records (EHRs) can improve communication between primary care providers and mental health specialists, ensuring that all team members have access to the same patient information. A 2023 study by Smith et al. highlighted that EHRs equipped with AI-driven analytics can streamline care coordination and help providers track patient progress over time (Smith et al., 2023).

### Quality Improvement and Performance Metrics

To ensure accountability and drive improvements in mental health care, implementing quality improvement initiatives and performance metrics is essential. These efforts provide a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of mental health services in primary care and identifying areas for improvement.

Quality improvement programs can focus on enhancing the use of evidence-based practices, such as standardized screening tools and brief psychotherapies. For example, quality improvement initiatives that promote the routine use of tools like the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) for depression screening have been shown to improve early detection and treatment outcomes (Patten & Williams, 2019). Additionally, tracking adherence to clinical guidelines for mental health care can help ensure that patients receive consistent, high-quality treatment.

Performance metrics should also measure patient outcomes, provider satisfaction, and system efficiency. For instance, metrics such as reduced wait times for mental health



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referrals, improved patient-reported outcomes, and lower rates of emergency department visits for mental health crises can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of primary care mental health services (Wang & Demler, 2019).

Technology plays a critical role in supporting quality improvement efforts. Data analytics tools can analyze large datasets to identify trends, predict outcomes, and evaluate the impact of interventions. A 2024 study by Robinson et al. demonstrated that AI-powered analytics tools enabled providers to identify high-risk patients and implement preventive measures, reducing hospitalizations for mental health crises (Robinson et al., 2024).

Finally, quality improvement initiatives should prioritize equity in mental health care delivery. As Browne & Varcoe (2019) note, performance metrics should include measures of equity to ensure that mental health services address the needs of marginalized populations. This includes tracking disparities in access, treatment, and outcomes across different demographic groups.

Policy and system-level changes are essential to strengthening the delivery of mental health care in primary care settings in Canada. Increased funding and resource allocation can support collaborative care models, telehealth services, and early intervention programs. Healthcare system redesign can improve integration and reduce systemic inequities, while quality improvement initiatives and performance metrics provide a framework for evaluating and enhancing care. By implementing these changes, Canada can build a more equitable, efficient, and effective mental

health care system that meets the needs of all Canadians.

### Recommendations for Improving Mental Health Care in Primary Care Settings in Canada

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, several key recommendations emerge to enhance the delivery and integration of mental health care within primary care settings in Canada. These recommendations target primary care physicians, policymakers, and healthcare systems, focusing on increasing funding, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, implementing evidence-based protocols, improving education and training, and leveraging technology and innovation.

#### 1. Increased Funding and Resources for Mental Health Care in Primary Care

**Recommendation:** Allocate targeted funding to support mental health services within primary care settings, particularly for underserved populations and rural communities.

**Rationale and Examples:** Insufficient funding has been a persistent barrier to effective mental health care in primary care. Increased investment is essential to expand access to mental health professionals, such as psychologists and social workers, within primary care teams. For instance, implementing collaborative care models, which have demonstrated improved outcomes for depression and anxiety, requires sustained financial support for hiring additional staff and integrating mental health professionals into primary care. Moreover, funding should prioritize telehealth services, especially for rural and remote communities.



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Recent studies have shown the effectiveness of telepsychiatry in expanding access to mental health care, but consistent funding is necessary to maintain infrastructure and train providers. Policymakers should also direct resources toward prevention and early intervention programs, such as universal mental health screening in primary care, to mitigate long-term costs associated with untreated mental illness.

## 2. Development of Collaborative Care Models and Interdisciplinary Teams

**Recommendation:** Expand the use of collaborative care models that integrate primary care providers, mental health professionals, and case managers into interdisciplinary teams.

**Rationale and Examples:** Collaborative care models have consistently improved outcomes for patients with mental health conditions by fostering teamwork and shared accountability among providers. These models involve regular communication and coordination between primary care providers and mental health specialists to ensure comprehensive, personalized care. For example, integrating nurse practitioners trained in mental health care into primary care teams can enhance access and improve patient outcomes, particularly in rural settings. Collaborative care approaches have also proven effective in managing complex cases, such as co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, by pooling the expertise of different providers. Policymakers should incentivize the adoption of these models through grants and funding for interdisciplinary training programs.

## 3. Implementation of Evidence-Based Screening and Treatment Protocols

**Recommendation:** Adopt standardized evidence-based screening and treatment protocols tailored to specific patient populations and the factors influencing mental health prevalence and outcomes.

**Rationale and Examples:** Early detection is critical to improving mental health outcomes, yet screening for mental health conditions in primary care remains inconsistent. Primary care physicians should routinely use standardized tools, such as the PHQ-9 for depression and the GAD-7 for anxiety, to identify mental health conditions early. These tools are effective, easy to administer, and adaptable to diverse populations. Tailored protocols are necessary to address the unique needs of specific populations, such as Indigenous communities, who experience higher rates of mental health challenges due to systemic inequities and intergenerational trauma. Integrating culturally sensitive screening tools and treatment approaches can significantly improve outcomes for these populations. Additionally, implementing evidence-based treatment protocols, such as stepped-care models, ensures that patients receive the appropriate level of care at the right time. For instance, patients with mild symptoms can be managed with brief psychotherapies, while those with more severe conditions may require pharmacotherapy or specialist referrals.

## 4. Enhanced Education and Training for Primary Care Providers

**Recommendation:** Invest in the education and training of primary care providers to



enhance their skills in diagnosing and managing mental health conditions.

**Rationale and Examples:** Primary care providers often feel underprepared to address mental health concerns due to limited training during medical education and a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities. To address this gap, medical schools and residency programs should integrate more comprehensive mental health training, including simulation-based learning and rotations in psychiatric care. Continuing professional development programs, such as workshops on motivational interviewing or trauma-informed care, can further equip practicing providers with practical skills. Online training platforms, particularly accessible for rural providers, have been shown to improve confidence and competence in managing mental health conditions. Policymakers should fund these initiatives and incentivize providers to participate through certification requirements or financial incentives.<sup>5</sup>

#### Increased Use of Technology and Innovation to Support Mental Health Care

**Recommendation:** Leverage technology, including telemedicine, digital therapeutics, and AI-driven tools, to enhance mental health care delivery in primary care.

**Rationale and Examples:** Technology has the potential to transform mental health care by increasing access, efficiency, and personalization. Telemedicine has proven effective in addressing geographical barriers to care, particularly in rural and remote areas. Policymakers should support the expansion of telehealth infrastructure and ensure equitable access to digital tools across all regions. Mobile health applications and digital therapeutics offer additional

opportunities to support mental health care. For instance, AI-powered apps can provide patients with personalized mental health support, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy exercises or mood tracking, which can supplement in-person care. AI is also being used to analyze data from electronic health records to identify high-risk patients and guide clinical decision-making. To maximize the potential of these technologies, healthcare systems should prioritize training providers to use digital tools effectively and address concerns about data privacy and security.

#### Key Findings

##### 1. The Importance of Funding and Resource Allocation

Increased funding is essential to strengthen primary care's ability to address mental health issues. Investments should support the integration of mental health specialists into collaborative care models, expand telehealth services for underserved populations, and fund prevention and early intervention programs (Johnson et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). Without adequate resources, primary care providers will continue to face limitations in diagnosing and managing mental health conditions effectively.

##### 2. Collaborative Care Models and Team Based Approaches

Collaborative care models, which integrate primary care providers with mental health professionals, have demonstrated significant improvements in patient outcomes. Interdisciplinary teams that include nurse practitioners, social workers, and psychologists can provide comprehensive, patient-centered care, especially for complex cases such as co-occurring mental health



and physical conditions (Kessler & Wang, 2019; Lemelin & Hogg, 2020). These models also reduce provider burnout by distributing responsibilities across a team.

### 3. Inclusive Evidence-Based Mental Health Screening and Tailored Treatment Protocols

The routine use of standardized mental health screening tools, such as the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, is critical for early detection and treatment of mental health conditions. Tailored protocols that consider the unique needs of diverse populations, including Indigenous communities and marginalized groups, are essential for equitable care (Patten & Williams, 2019; Bombay & Matheson, 2020).

### 4. Education and Training for Primary Care Providers

Addressing gaps in provider training is crucial to improving mental health care in primary care. Enhanced undergraduate and postgraduate education, along with accessible continuing professional development programs, can equip providers with the skills needed to diagnose, treat, and manage mental health conditions. Online training platforms and simulation-based learning offer valuable tools for rural providers and time-constrained clinicians (Smith et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2024).

### 5. The Role of Technology and Innovation

Technology has emerged as a powerful tool for expanding access to mental health care. Telemedicine, digital therapeutics, and AI-driven tools offer scalable solutions for improving care delivery, particularly in rural and remote areas. For example, telepsychiatry has reduced wait times for specialist consultations, while AI-powered apps provide personalized mental health

support to patients (Nguyen et al., 2023; Lim & Jacobs, 2019). However, ensuring equitable access to these technologies and addressing data privacy concerns remain key priorities.

### Implications

The findings of this review underscore the pressing need for systemic changes to prioritize mental health care within Canada's primary care system. Policymakers, healthcare administrators, and primary care providers must work collaboratively to address the gaps in funding, training, and service delivery that currently limit access to and the quality of mental health care.

Improving mental health care in primary care is not only necessary for individual well-being but also for the broader healthcare system. Untreated mental health conditions contribute to significant economic and societal costs, including lost productivity, increased physical health complications, and higher rates of hospitalization (Lim & Jacobs, 2019; Sareen & Afifi, 2018). By investing in primary care as a frontline solution to mental health care, Canada can reduce these burdens and improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

### Conclusion

The growing prevalence of mental health conditions in Canada highlights the critical need to strengthen mental health care within primary care settings. This review identifies actionable strategies, including increased funding, the development of collaborative care models, enhanced education and



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training, standardized screening protocols, and the use of technology to expand access and improve care delivery and outcomes. By implementing these evidence-based

recommendations, Canada can build a more equitable, efficient, and effective mental health care system that meets the needs of its diverse population.

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