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## **Patients First: A Proposal to Strengthen Patient-Centered Health Care in Ontario**

Ontario Telemedicine Network response to December 17, 2015 MOHLTC Discussion Paper

Dr. Edward Brown, CEO  
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The Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) is pleased to have an opportunity to comment on the *Patients First Discussion Paper* issued by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care on December 17, 2015.

Telemedicine puts patients first by bringing health care to where they are – in their communities and in their homes. As such, OTN is confident that telemedicine will be a key component of the integrated, patient-centered health care system that the Ministry is striving to create. We welcome a dialogue on how to make this a reality.

### **Telemedicine in Ontario – Where health care meets innovation.**

Ontario has one of the largest and most sophisticated collaborative telemedicine environments in the world. OTN – an independent, not-for-profit corporation – is responsible for managing and strengthening the provincial telemedicine system. Our province-wide network has transformed the way patients receive health care by connecting the system, improving access to health care providers, and eliminating barriers to care. This year, our network will support more than 500,000 clinical events.

For 10 years, OTN has provided a range of services and programs that have tangibly demonstrated the four goals at the heart of the Patients First strategy.

1. Ontario's province-wide videoconferencing network has provided faster, cheaper and more convenient **access** to health care services for millions of Ontarians;
2. OTN's eConsult service **connects** clinicians to allow more coordinated and integrated care;
3. Our education programs and platform helps **inform** and train health care providers through by enabling over 20,000 professional learning events a year. On the patient side, OTN's Telehomecare program offers much more than remote monitoring for patients with chronic conditions; it also enables behavioral change through patient coaching and education, which is in turn driving a 60% reduction in hospitalization during and beyond the six month enrollment period for these patients; and
4. Through our network, Ontarians in the North receive care closer to home, yielding annual travel grant cost avoidance of over \$60M, thereby providing value and financial savings for the province, helping to **protect** our health care system. Moreover, the social and economic costs avoided through telemedicine are likely orders of magnitude larger.

Over the past two years, OTN has evolved its service delivery model, added new services, and introduced a more efficient and lower-cost software-based model. OTN is also positioning itself as a key provincial collaborator in the development of new care delivery models enabled by information and communication technology, by adding value as a change management agent for incorporation of virtual care solutions into clinical workflows. A pivotal role OTN seeks to increasingly play is to scale innovative virtual care-enabled business processes that support and drive more integrated and outcome-based delivery of health care.

The most important beneficiaries of Ontario's telemedicine network are patients. By bringing their health care closer to home, and now into their homes, telemedicine is a tangible example of putting *patients first*. Any provincial strategy for patient-centered health care in Ontario must include adequate consideration of virtual care delivery as a key enabler of broader transformational priorities.

### **Patients First – A new impetus for telemedicine in Ontario.**

OTN is strongly supportive of the directional changes outlined in the *Patients First* proposal. Stronger and more integrated regional governance for primary care, home and community care and public health will open up a new range of possibilities for better health care planning, coordination, delivery and ultimately, outcomes for patients and for the system.

OTN was pleased to see reference to the importance of virtual care in the Discussion Paper. There is growing awareness of the foundational role of virtual care in an integrated, patient-centered health care system. Evidence from leading health systems around the world indicates that Ontario would be well-served to ensure that changes to health care policy, governance and structure take consideration of virtual care as a key enabler of the new models of care required for a high performing system.

### **OTN's Support for *Patients First* – Telemedicine frees up system and provider capacity and improves patient care.**

OTN is committed to ensuring that the learnings and capabilities that we have accumulated over the past decade, as well as the integrated provincial network that we have built with the support of the Province, will be fully leveraged in support of the goals and initiatives associated with the Ministry's *Patients First* plan.

Dedicated OTN resources currently support new models such as Health Links, Integrated Funding Models and remote monitoring of chronic disease patients. These are a few examples of our broader commitment to provide subject matter expertise and implementation support for the incorporation of virtual care solutions into new models of care delivery. Beyond this, we look forward to working with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to explore how telemedicine can provide value and become integrated into these new models of care at scale, as appropriate.

Specifically, OTN will:

1. Share best practices and methodologies on how integrated care can be delivered from a virtual solutions perspective;
2. Support the design and implementation of virtual care-enabled integrated care pathways;
3. Work closely with LHINs and sub-LHIN regional leaders to coordinate and maximize the value of telemedicine resources, investments and programs;

4. Actively participate at planning and policy tables to integrate virtual tools into programs and services in alignment with Patients First priorities;
5. Provide virtual care-related strategic planning and change management support to our partners; and
6. Support the evaluation and scaling of innovative virtual care-enabled solutions and business models.

## Recommendations

In response to the Patients First Discussion Paper, OTN offers the following recommendations for Ministry consideration:

1. Ensure that from a policy, governance, accountability, performance management and reporting perspective, new models of primary, home, community and population-based care are developed with a view to a significant proportion of care and support being delivered virtually. Specifically:
  - Better and more coordinated **home** and **community care** will inevitably require the use of technology to connect patients with their providers, provide support to caregivers, and connect health care teams more efficiently and effectively. Telemedicine is a powerful tool to support patients and caregivers at home; to activate them in their own self-care, and reduce the use of expensive in-home visits and patient utilization of more expensive acute care resource;
  - More effective models of **primary care**, including team-based care for complex patients, integrated primary and specialist care models, and remote access to primary care will need to rely heavily on telemedicine tools such as video, eConsult and remote monitoring.
2. Include telemedicine or virtual care, as a component of new (i) provincial policy and (ii) regional planning, governance and accountability processes and mechanisms.
3. Create an accommodating policy environment for the growth of telemedicine.

OTN would be delighted to engage in further dialogue with the Ministry on the nature and implications of these recommendations.