

## Dialogue communiqué

### Citizens want to lead the next big health system transformation – it's time to support them in making it happen

15 February 2024

“Who knows the care experience better than those experiencing care?” That’s a common question many people rely on to get to the heart of healthcare improvement efforts. But that question can also serve as a stark reminder that many attempts to improve healthcare do so without patients or citizens at the table.

Now, rather than wait to be invited to the table, a group of concerned citizens and healthcare leaders in Canada want to convene their own exchange. They are calling it a national people’s summit – a table with seats for citizens and healthcare leaders alike with the goal of sharing lessons learned from across Canada that puts everyday people front and centre in health systems and its much-needed transformation.

The idea was sparked last fall at a stakeholder dialogue, [Co-designing approaches to citizen co-led design, execution and oversight of health system transformation](#), hosted by McMaster University’s Health Leadership Academy’s National Health Fellows Program and the McMaster Health Forum.

“I’d love to see a summit where we have all of these people who’ve done good things come together and share and we set out consciously to learn what we can do in our own jurisdictions based on the wisdom and experiences of others,” says Judy Birdsell, one of the dialogue participants. A steadfast champion of involving patient perspectives in healthcare, Birdsell co-founded the Imagine Citizens Network and is its immediate past Board chair.

“I think we need to collectively focus on building the capability, knowledge and capacity of all people living in Canada to know more about our health system and claim ownership and our role in that,” says Birdsell.

“A national people’s summit on healthcare is not just a meeting, but a movement. It is a collective effort to shape the future of health for ourselves and our communities, by listening, learning, and leading together,” adds Donald Carty, a dialogue participant and fellow in the National Health Fellows Program and Co-Chair of the Barrie and Area Ontario Health Team.

“We need to be honest about where our system is at right now alongside those with lived experience who are actually experiencing the system we have right now. And we need to create more spaces and mechanisms by which we can have those tough conversations,” says Caroline Wong, a dialogue participant and executive director of the Centre of Excellence on Partnership with Patients and the Public.

As noted in the [summary](#) that captured insights from the stakeholder dialogue, health systems across Canada are failing to deliver the health services that Canadians need. More than that, participants said that the Canada Health Act – the federal legislation that defines the national principles governing healthcare in Canada – is no longer ‘fit for purpose’ given the realities of health systems in 2023, which have moved far beyond hospital-based and physician-delivered services to provide people with the services they need, when and where they need them. Participants also called out the lack of progress towards truth and reconciliation and towards self-determination for Indigenous peoples in Canada.

“There’s no delaying it now,” says dialogue participant Maureen Smith, “The will is there and citizens are expecting that they are right there at the table.”

Smith self-describes as a healthcare “frequent flier,” having relied on the healthcare system subsequent to a rare disease diagnosis in childhood. Today, Smith serves in many citizen engagement roles including chairing Cochrane’s Consumer Network Executive and the Global Evidence Commission’s Citizen Leadership Group.

What dialogue participants shared, said Smith, is “a common desire to improve a system that many of us see is falling apart.” But what they want to do about it, is what’s particularly powerful. In addition to convening a national people’s summit, dialogue participants are calling for the creation of a learning ‘hub’ or observatory to document and share Canadian experiences with and lessons learned in pursuing citizen co-led design, execution and oversight of health system transformation. The creation of a hub would directly respond to one of the key challenges that dialogue participants identified that’s causing health-system transformation to lag Canada. That is, success stories are not routinely shared across the country, nor are successful methods for engaging citizens in co-creating system change.

Another key challenge, said participants, were too few examples of everyday people being able to hold healthcare and political leaders accountable for health-system goals (other than through their voting rights). To address this obstacle, dialogue participants are calling for people-centred governance models that drive citizen co-led health-system transformation.

“What does it mean when you say that citizens are at the table? Meaningful engagement means understanding all of the issues, being able to know exactly what influence you can have, and what decision-making power you have. It’s not a conversation that starts and ends and you don’t know where it’s going to go – that’s not what citizens want right now. They want to be involved in the process,” says Smith.

“It’s about more than engagement, it’s about co-leading the work. It’s about making sure that the patient voice, the Indigenous voice, all of that expertise, is at every level of decision-making – not just at day one, not at the end point, but ingrained in everything that we do,” says Joss Reimer, president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association.

A new governance model would also mean redirecting the focus of improvement to what matters to citizens, for example, emphasizing that ‘home is where the health is.’

“It’s important that we reframe what we look at – that we recast our gaze in healthcare and look at a community level. Health is created in homes and communities and augmented by the healthcare system or illness system. We need to define our action zone as communities and our outcomes as well-being and not dealing with deficits,” says Birdsell.

Stakeholder dialogue participants are calling on organizations to support the proposed national people’s summit through funding and hosting the event.

## Turning the corner on health system transformation requires...

- everyday citizens be front and centre in provincial/territorial health systems and much-needed transformation
- Indigenous rights’ holders are front and centre too as a first and fundamental step for bringing truth and reconciliation to healthcare in Canada and self-determination for Indigenous peoples in Canada
- imagining a ‘future possible’ for health systems in Canada that shifts to real health system transformation hand-in-hand with real citizen engagement
- a national people’s summit that puts citizens in the driver’s seat of health systems and holds politicians to account

## Quotes:

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- Judy Birdsell, Citizen | [video](#)

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“I left with a renewed sense of optimism. There’s no delaying it now. The will is there to do it and citizens are expecting that they are right there at the table with equal voices and sharing their perspectives.”

- Maureen Smith, Citizen | [video](#)

“A national people’s summit on health care is a chance to make our voices heard, our choices respected, and our health improved. It is a way to build trust, collaboration, and innovation in our health system, and to take charge of our own well-being.”

“A national people’s summit on health care is more than a meeting, it is a movement. It is a chance for us to shape the future of health by making our voices heard, our choices respected, and our well-being improved. It is a collective effort to build trust, collaboration, and innovation in our health system, by listening, learning, and leading together.”

- Donald Carty, Fellow, National Health Fellows Program and co-chair, Barrie and Area Ontario Health Team

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- Joss Reimer, president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association | [video](#)

“As we embark on an era of major change in healthcare in Canada where resources are challenging and care needs must be focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, I was truly honoured to be invited to participate in the McMaster Health Forum that focused on citizen co-led design of sustainable approaches in execution and oversight of health system transformation in Canada. The forum provided the opportunity to listen to the incredible ideas from those that we serve and deepen our engagement process to include collaborators from across the healthcare continuum. As SVP, Chief Legal, Privacy and Compliance Officer at SE Health, I have recently had the privilege of leading our patient and family centered care initiatives and will use this experience and approach to propel our co-design efforts with patients forward with the intention to engage in critical reflection, quality improvement and objective evaluation of our efforts.”

- Farah Ismail, Fellow, National Health Fellows Program and senior vice-president, Chief Legal, Privacy and Compliance Officer. SE Health

“Healthcare professionals and leaders across our country are more actively engaging citizens, the public, people who live on these lands in how we transform our healthcare system. The willingness to do that and the opportunity to be transparent, honest, and talk about the hard issues around the table was the striking insight.”

“We need to learn to live with our discomfort and be able to have these types of discussions and involve more people, especially decision makers who can also sit uncomfortably with some of these challenges and be honest about where our system is at right now alongside those with lived experience who are actually experiencing the system we have right now. And we need to create more spaces and mechanisms by which we can have those tough conversations.”

- Caroline Wong, executive director of the Centre of Excellence on Partnership with Patients and the Public | [video](#)

"We've hosted over a hundred dialogues at the McMaster Health Forum and this one was markedly different in that citizens and healthcare leaders are calling to move past the rhetoric that too often surrounds discussions of health system transformation in Canada and initiate a 'hard restart' that puts citizens in the driver's seat of achieving real system transformation felt by everyday people in everyday life."

- John Lavis, Director, [McMaster Health Forum](#), McMaster University

Health Leadership Academy, [National Health Fellows Program](#), McMaster University

“The National Health Fellows Program brings together the country's leading healthcare executives. Together with the citizen partners at this dialogue, the fellows have spoken, calling for citizen-engaged health system transformation.”

- Michael Hartmann, Co-Director

“We’ve talked at length about health system transformation in Canada, but the only way to achieve it is by creating space for citizens to truly co-lead the change required. And for leaders – like the National Health Fellows – to step up as supportive allies.”

- David Price, Co-Director

“Collaboration is essential for tackling urgent challenges, but systemic change requires more than collective efforts. Transformative practices, capable of shifting mindsets, values, power dynamics, and relationships within our systems, often exist on the periphery. The next frontier is bringing these profound and impactful transformational approaches to the mainstream, empowering everyone to contribute to a more meaningful shift in our systems. This requires that those who work in health and care shift power to the citizens and residents in our country. I'm proud of the brave space we are willing to take.”

- Jodeme Goldhar, Strategic Advisor

### Key resources

[Stakeholder dialogue summary](#)  
[Video playlist](#)  
[Evidence brief](#)

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