



Topic Overview

Citizen Panel and Stakeholder Dialogue

Enhancing Equitable Access to Assistive Technologies in Canada

The McMaster Health Forum convened a citizen panel on the subject of enhancing equitable access to assistive technologies in Canada on 7 April 2017 (Hamilton, ON), 21 April 2017 (Edmonton, AB) and 5 May 2017 (Moncton, NB) followed by a stakeholder dialogue on the same subject convened on 8 June 2017 that was informed by the insights captured at the panel. The panel and dialogue were organized with the support of AGE-WELL NCE Inc. and McMaster University's Labarge Optimal Aging Initiative. The panel brought together a total of 37 citizens from across Canada, and the dialogue brought together 22 participants – 6 policymakers, 2 managers, 1 healthcare professional, 4 researchers, and 9 stakeholders – from across Canada to examine the problem, elements of a potentially comprehensive approach for addressing it and key implementation considerations.

Insights from citizens about the problem

Panel participants identified seven challenges related to enhancing equitable access to assistive technologies in Canada: 1) assistive technologies do not seem to be fairly allocated; 2) access to assistive technologies is complicated and often not focused on needs of the individual; 3) many face challenges in paying for needed assistive technologies and/or engaging with the private sector to identify and purchase what they need; 4) there is a lack of an integrated approach to delivery of assistive technologies as part of larger care pathways and packages of care; 5) stigma associated with needing an assistive technology; 6) caregiver burden and challenges in getting appropriate supports; and 7) the lack of integration of assistive technologies into infrastructure.





A total of 37 citizens from across the country gather during McMaster Health Forum citizen panels on 7 April 2017 (Hamilton, ON), 21 April 2017 (Edmonton, AB) and 5 May 2017 (Moncton, NB).



Photos include participants and McMaster Health Forum staff.

Insights from citizens about the elements

Participants were supportive of information and education provision to help them make decisions about which assistive technologies they need and how to access them (element 1), emphasizing that information needs to be reliable and provided through a central point of contact. To help citizens get the most out of publicly funded programs (element 2), participants stressed the need for equitable access regardless of ability to pay. Participants emphasized the need to ensure access to assistive technologies that help people meet basic needs for daily living, and to all of the 50 priority assistive technologies identified by the World Health Organization, as well as supporting groups that face a disproportionate burden (e.g., people with disabilities, mental health conditions and chronic disease). For supporting access to needed assistive technologies that are not covered by public programs (element 3), participants recognized the need for collaboration between the health system and other sectors, with a focus on the private sector (e.g., insurance companies) and voluntary sector (e.g., charities). Across the elements, two values-related themes emerged with some consistency: 1) collaboration (to coordinate access to needed assistive technologies and between the health system and other sectors to support consistency across the country); and 2) equity (to ensure that all of those in need of assistive technologies have access regardless of ability to pay).

Insights from citizens about the implementation considerations

When discussing the potential barriers and facilitators to moving forward, participants identified collaboration between the health system and other sectors as a challenge, yet central to supporting streamlined access to programs and services offering assistive technologies across Canada. Despite this, participants thought there was an opportunity for coordination and collaboration given the potential for cost-savings to the health system through greater efficiency. Within the health system, participants identified having occupational therapists work within primary-care teams as key to supporting system navigation.



A total of 22 participants drawn from government and from health, professional and research organizations gather during a McMaster Health Forum stakeholder dialogue on 8 June 2017.

Photos include participants and McMaster Health Forum staff.

Stakeholders' deliberation about the problem

Participants were receptive to the framing of the problem in the evidence brief, however, the deliberations about the problem led participants to identify a number of specific challenges in the province, including that: 1) root causes drive many of the challenges that individuals face in accessing assistive technologies; 2) complex patient journeys are not often accommodated in the current system; 3) financial challenges persist as a critical barrier to achieving equitable access to assistive technologies; and 4) difficulty in achieving innovation and ensuring that high-quality products come to market.

Stakeholders' deliberation about an approach

In deliberating about the elements of a potentially comprehensive approach for enhancing equitable access to assistive technologies, participants felt there was too much of a focus on incremental changes in the brief. Instead, participants collectively agreed that there was a need to balance incremental and aspirational changes. To do so, participants described a set of principles they felt should underpin both short- and long-term changes. In discussing element 1 (informing citizens, caregivers and healthcare providers to help them make decisions about which assistive technologies they need and how to access them), participants highlighted the need to adopt a common language, improve navigation services, and enhance access to individualized assessments.

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Stakeholders' deliberation about an approach... cont'd.

For element 2 (helping citizens get the most out of government funded programs) and 3 (supporting citizens to access needed assistive technologies that are not covered by government-funded programs), participants focused on the need to better align government programs with the needs of those requiring assistive technologies, as well as to coordinate public- and private-insurance coverage to minimize gaps. In addition, participants emphasized that over the long term there is a need to centralize and simplify the processes of approval, eligibility and assessment for assistive technologies, as well as implement a robust data collection and evaluation strategy.

Stakeholders' deliberation about next steps

Participants identified four priorities for moving forward: 1) spreading awareness of assistive technologies and engaging those using or in need of assistive technologies in crafting a long-term vision; 2) working with partners across health and social systems to determine what data should be collected on assistive technologies, and how to evaluate new technologies that enter the market; 3) building capacity among health professionals who are closely involved with the provision of assistive technologies; and 4) exploring the types of small-scale innovation projects designed to enhance equitable access to assistive technologies that could be funded and evaluated in select jurisdictions to determine what works.

Panels and dialogue deliverables

To learn more about this topic, consult our complete [set of products](#), which include: the citizen brief that was presented to citizens before the panels, the evidence brief that was presented to dialogue participants before the dialogue, the summary of the panels, the summary of the dialogue, and the video interviews with dialogue participants.

Products addressing other topics are also available on our website www.mcmasterforum.org. Click on 'Find evidence>Products' in the menu.