Helping newcomers overcome barriers to health care

Paul Caulford MSc MD CCFP FCFP, Scarborough Academic Family Health Centre;
Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

There are multiple barriers that prevent immigrant and refugee children, youth and families from accessing or receiving quality health care in Canada. A barrier to health care is anything that restricts the use of health services by making it more difficult for some individuals to access, use or benefit from care. Barriers vary among provinces and territories. Broadly, however, they include a complex array of political, social and health system-related rules and requirements, as well as factors relating to the culture of the patient, the family and the health care provider. Being aware of barriers to health care can help health professionals to be more sensitive to the challenges faced by their patients. Health care providers can also take steps to reduce or overcome some of these barriers to improve quality of care. Here are some simple things that health professionals can do:

Self-educate and train practice staff about:

- How to provide culturally competent care.
- Health issues that are more common in newcomers.
- Availability of local community resources and how to help patients connect with them.
- Health care coverage eligibility for immigrants and refugees, including the Interim Federal Health Program for refugees and provincial coverage, if available. Policies at local hospitals or clinics concerning eligibility and emergency care can vary – find out what they are. Circulate clear guidelines for staff regarding care entitlements of different groups.

Help newcomer families access health care services

- Educate newcomer patients about their eligibility for health care coverage based on immigration/refugee status. Inform them about free local public health services (eg, immunizations).
- Help educate patients about navigating the Canadian health system.
- Connect patients with a regular primary care provider (or a community health centre for those who are uninsured) and support services (eg, social work, transportation, interpreters, financial aid, settlement services, legal agencies).

Streamline health care coverage paperwork

- Ask about your patient's immigration or refugee status and know which health care services or benefits they are (or are not) entitled to.
- Register with Mediavie Blue Cross, which administers the Interim Federal Health program. Check a newcomer patient's coverage at each visit.
- Improve the rate and completion of payment, eg, by identifying one person in your practice to learn and manage the process.

Help build newcomers' trust in the health care system

- Be clear to newcomer patients that patient information is confidential.
- Provide flexible appointment times to accommodate mental health needs or irregular work schedules.
- Provide printed reminders and use tracking systems to improve patient attendance and monitor access to care.
- Encourage positive and stable relations with all clinic staff.
- Offer preventive services; emphasize the benefits of continuity of care, prevention and screening.

Promote effective communication with patients and families

- Understand the importance of interpreters, how best to work with them, how to arrange for services in advance and appropriate alternatives. Avoid using children in families as interpreters. Advocate for interpretive services in your community.
- Be aware that eliciting information about sensitive issues from young newcomers may require several consultations.
- Learn about the family's dynamics and sociocultural perceptions of illness.
- Provide health promotional materials in multiple languages, many of which are available online.
- Provide a letter for newcomer families that explains a child's diagnoses or needs, if applicable. This can help the family when seeking support services or urgent care.

Pool information and resources

- Use an interprofessional team approach, including referrals to appropriate community organizations.
- Pool local interest in newcomer patients and information about providing care.

Please visit the Canadian Paediatric Society's Caring for Kids New to Canada website (www.kidsnewtocanada.ca) for more information and resources on serving this population.

SOURCES

1. Scheppers E, van Dongen E, Dekker J, et al. Potential barriers to the use of health services among ethnic minorities: A review. *Fam Pract* 2006;23:325-48.
2. Salehi R. Intersection of health, immigration, and youth: A systematic literature review. *J Immigr Minor Health* 2010;12:788-97.
3. Caulford P, Vali Y. Providing health care to medically uninsured immigrants and refugees. *CMAJ* 2006;174:1253-4.
4. Simich L, Wu F, Nerard S. Status and health security: An exploratory study of irregular immigrants in Toronto. *Can J Public Health* 2007;98:369-73.
5. Davidson N, Skull S, Burgner D, et al. An issue of access: Delivering equitable health care for newly arrived refugee children in Australia. *J Paediatr Child Health* 2004;40:569-75.

Also available at www.kidsnewtocanada.ca

Correspondence: Canadian Paediatric Society, 2305 St Laurent Boulevard, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 4J8. E-mail info@cps.ca,

website www.kidsnewtocanada.ca

Accepted for publication August 13, 2014