

A Health Ombudsman, or An Ombudsman for Health?

In 2007, when the current government made a commitment to establishing a health Ombudsman, we at Ombudsman Saskatchewan took notice. We heard they were looking for a clear independent body for the public to turn to when concerns arise about the health care system.

They wanted this body to do the following:

- assess whether the Ministry of Health fairly adjudicates its policies.
- act as an independent investigator to ensure patients are treated fairly within the health system.
- identify systemic problems in the health system and make recommendations for improvement.
- assist patients in navigating the system and getting the care they need in a timely way.

Ombudsman Saskatchewan felt that, with the exception of the last requirement, our office already had this mandate by virtue of *The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act*. We examined the various models of health care ombudsman both nationally and internationally and provided government with an overview. Our submission to

government took no position on which model was preferable to us, though most of the models included the duties that the government had identified as desirable. One option was to keep this work with our office and this was the model chosen by government.

**So what are we?
A Health Ombudsman or an
Ombudsman with jurisdiction in
health?**

At Ombudsman Saskatchewan, we propose that the publicly delivered health care system has always been within our jurisdiction since our office was created. It is our vision (an ideal that we would like to see become reality) that government is always fair and that includes provincial government agencies such as the Ministry of Health or a Regional Health Authority that deliver health care services. The title "Health Ombudsman" would suggest that the scope of the work is exclusive to health and we feel that we have so much more to offer. Many times an issue involves more

than one government agency or the provincial agency that is key in solving a 'potential health care problem' really rests with another government agency. For example, travel to access health care services might mean the involvement of the Social Assistance Program or a subsidized bus pass available from the Saskatchewan Transportation Company. Being eligible for family health benefits might require an application to the Ministry of Social Services. Services to a victim of sexual assault might also include Victims Services. In all of these cases, if an issue arose, we have the jurisdiction to examine how these systems work in tandem with each other which takes the broader systemic approach.

We also know that the health care system is a complicated and highly regulated system with the regulatory professional associations already providing oversight. The associations have the expertise and mandate to review the clinical practice of their professional members. Further, each health region and the Ministry of Health have Quality Care Coordinators and Client Representatives

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who provide patient navigation and advocacy services. With those services already in place, the Ombudsman jurisdiction to examine matters of administration provides the remedy for issues of fairness. Matters of administration in a public health care system are generally decisions about how health services are planned, organized and provided by the system to the public and are typically bound by legislation, regulations and based on policies and procedures. We will and do refer matters involving clinical issues to the experts and those who need navigational assistance or advocacy to the QCC or Client Representatives. When issues of fairness arise, the referrals come to us, providing a range of remedies to the individual – particularly given the broad mandate of the Ombudsman.

Our mission at Ombudsman Saskatchewan is to promote and protect fairness in the design and delivery of government services. We do that in a number of ways and while receiving and reviewing complaints is a large part of our work, we have much more to offer. We promote fairness by offering our fair practice training sessions which have been very popular with a number of sessions offered for health care professionals.

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Further, we promote fairness by offering our fairness lens services – a voluntary, pro-active analysis – when government is reviewing or creating programs or policies and wishes to ensure that they are fair.

Our broad mandate means that we can, at times, provide more comprehensive services. Our open fair practice training sessions include staff or representatives from many agencies providing opportunities to compare and share tips or best practices. Agencies learn about each other and there is a forum for knowledge exchange. Our Fairness Lens service draws on our experience from work with multiple agencies and ministries and we have the ability to recognize that a change with one policy in one agency can have an effect on another policy with another agency.

For all these reasons, we believe

our broad jurisdiction enables us to provide a more complete set of services with greater expertise for resolving fairness issues in health care and across the provincial government spectrum.

How Can You Promote Fairness in Your Workplace?

If your office or work unit would like more information about our services, such as when to refer people to our office, or if you would like to inquire about our workshops or presentations, you are welcome to contact us or visit our website.

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