

Alberta's Strategic Clinical Networks

Past, Present, Future



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Executive summary

The past decade has marked a period of health system transformation in Alberta. Our province created Canada's first province-wide, fully integrated health system in 2008. Since then, health partners across Alberta have been working to embed innovation and evidence into daily practice to continuously improve health outcomes and health service delivery, ensuring high quality care and value for every Albertan.

To support these objectives, Alberta Health Services (AHS) created 16 Strategic Clinical Networks™ (SCNs™). Each network focuses on a specific area of health and includes clinicians, patients, operational leaders, researchers, community and industry partners, and other stakeholders who work together to drive health system improvement and innovation. The networks function as integrated teams and provide an opportunity for these partners to work collaboratively to identify and solve health challenges, align their efforts, get evidence into practice, and spread and scale successful innovations. By bringing together health system data and rigorously applying evidence-based approaches, the networks are able to advance quality improvements and fully leverage the potential of having a province-wide health system.

Since 2012, the SCNs have become an important resource for Alberta's health system and have significantly impacted health and care in our province. Alberta has become a leader in many areas of health, including stroke and surgical care, bone and joint health, and elder-friendly care. The networks have helped develop integrated care pathways, improve access to care and reduce unwarranted variation in care in several important disease conditions. This work is delivering a significant return on investment. A detailed review of the first nine SCN projects showed a cumulative savings of \$43.2 million. When accounting for the costs of starting a network, this equates to a 2:1 return on investment. These savings continue to accrue and an updated analysis will be available in fall 2019.

Earlier this year, the SCNs were asked to develop a strategic plan for the next five years that will enable the networks to address key health challenges and maximize their collective impact. In doing so, they identified seven common areas of focus: (1) Engage the people of Alberta; (2) Strengthen our connections; (3) Support integrated care across the patient journey; (4) Promote wellness, prevention and population health; (5) Improve value and sustainability; (6) Advance health research and innovation; and (7) Support our people and processes. These areas of focus complement the work being done in specific areas of health and reflect strategic priorities for our health system and the people of Alberta.

As we look ahead, it's appropriate to reflect on the SCN's past, present and future, acknowledge the partnerships that have enabled this work, and consider how we can move forward together to drive innovation and accelerate our path to better health and care. This report highlights learnings from the past seven years and key priorities for the networks over the next five years.

Alberta's Strategic Clinical Networks

Clinical networks are groups of clinicians, patients, operational leaders and other stakeholders (Figure 1) who work together to solve health challenges, get evidence into practice, and implement strategies to improve health outcomes, clinical care and service delivery. They have existed system-wide in the UK, Scotland and parts of Australia for nearly 20 years.

Alberta Health Services (AHS) launched its first clinical networks in 2012, with an emphasis on patient engagement and rigorous adherence to implementation science and evidence-based practice. There are currently 16 Strategic Clinical Networks (SCNs), each focusing on a specific area of health (Figure 2) and partnering with stakeholders across the health spectrum.



Figure 1 Network stakeholders

Each network is multidisciplinary and operates provincially. By design, Alberta's SCNs are embedded within a single, integrated health system. This structure facilitates collaboration and supports quality improvement, integrated care and implementation of new practices, pathways and guidelines on a provincial scale.

Alberta's SCNs are united by a common mission: *Improving the health of Albertans by bringing together people, research and innovation.* We partner with patients and families to identify priorities that matter to the people of Alberta. And we work with operational leaders, care providers, communities and academic partners to find the right solutions. Collectively and individually, the SCNs focus on improving health outcomes and care across the province and impacting all aspects of the Quadruple Aim.

To date, more than 10,000 individuals from across Alberta have participated in network activities as committee and working group members. By partnering across all zones, the networks are able to leverage resources and align efforts to achieve better quality, safety and value.

Over the past seven years, this work has contributed to improvements in many areas of health, including stroke and surgical care. We've reduced variation by developing integrated, evidence-based care pathways for pregnant women and people with diabetes, cancer, asthma and kidney

Alberta's Strategic Clinical Networks: Past, Present, Future

disease. We've improved access to stroke care and health services for rural and First Nations communities and we're building capacity for further health system research and innovation. These actions are guided by shared values and a shared commitment to provide high quality, patient-centered and sustainable healthcare to every Albertan.

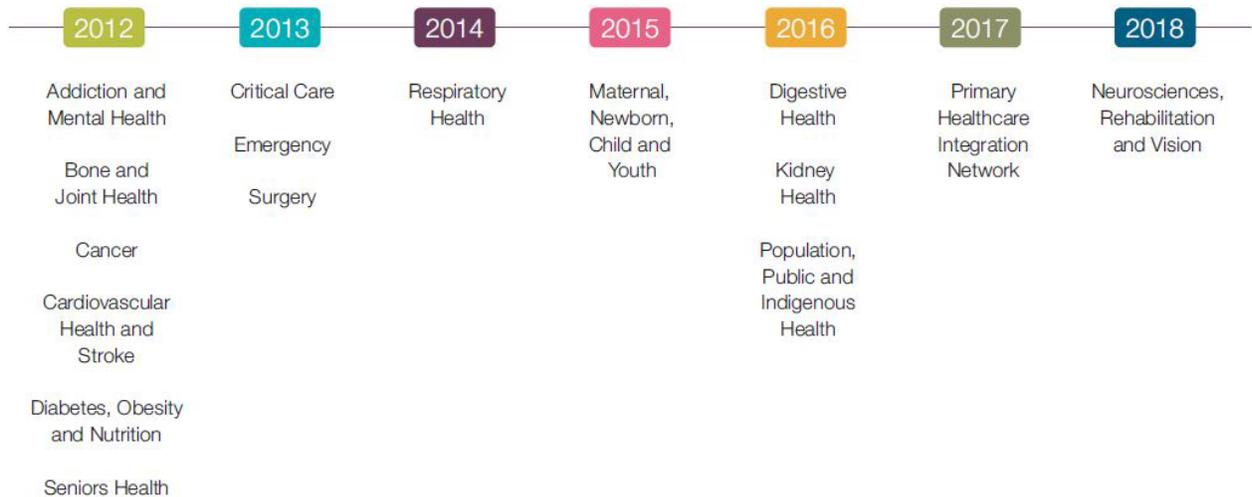


Figure 2 Alberta's SCNs

Network achievements and future plans

Since launching seven years ago, the SCNs have played an important role in advancing health system improvement, sustainability and transformation. The SCN Retrospective (2019) profiles some of these achievements and the partnerships that have enabled this work. The SCNs have also developed a strategic action plan for the next five years that includes detailed objectives and actions that will enable us to continue to accelerate health system improvement and impact the lives and health of Albertans.

Results and Return on Investment

All SCN projects track return on investment (ROI) since their mandate is to not only improve outcomes but also value and health system sustainability. A comprehensive analysis of ROI for the first nine SCN projects was completed in 2015. This analysis showed an estimated cumulative savings of over 43,000 bed days (a savings of \$28M) plus \$15.2M in direct cost savings, for a total of \$43.2M. When accounting for the costs of starting a network, this ROI equates to a 2:1 return, meaning every dollar invested in SCN activities produced two dollars in savings. These savings have continued to accrue and a six-year cumulative ROI for SCN projects is currently underway. An updated report on ROI will be available in fall 2019.

Priorities and Action Plan

In early 2018, the AHS Executive Leadership Team asked the SCNs to develop a strategic plan that would build on the networks' accomplishments to date and identify collective areas of focus going forward. To ensure this reflected the diverse needs and perspectives of all network stakeholders, an extensive consultation and engagement process was launched. This process lasted over six months and involved individual interviews and focus groups with more than 200 stakeholders across the province. The areas of focus, objectives and actions outlined in this plan reflect the input, feedback and recommendations we heard during this consultation. The plan also includes a measurement framework to track our progress and ensure transparency and accountability.

Rationale: Why clinical networks?

The Federal Advisory Panel on Healthcare Innovation has noted an urgent need for fundamental changes in how healthcare is organized, financed and delivered across Canada. In a 2015 report, the Panel identified some examples of health innovation, but also noted a general failure to scale and spread strategies and solutions at a provincial level. Alberta's SCNs provide a structure to support these goals and fully tap the potential opportunities created by having a province-wide health system.

Although the structure of clinical networks varies internationally, their purpose has generally been to accelerate the process of getting evidence into practice, something that studies suggest takes more than 10 years for most health systems. Clinical networks use data and evidence to identify gaps in care, and work collaboratively with clinicians and operational leaders to design, test and evaluate strategies to increase evidence-based practice, and then operationalize practices that demonstrate improved outcomes and value.

Clinical networks support this knowledge-to-action cycle and have been shown to improve health outcomes and care delivery. Under the right conditions, they can also enable system-wide change. Based on comprehensive reviews, researchers have identified several critical success factors, including effective leadership, partnerships and communication, particularly with operational partners. Successful networks are also embedded within the health system, have adequate resources and access to health data, and strategically align their work with others.

Bringing evidence into practice: How SCNs support health system improvement

Each SCN has a mandate to identify gaps in care, improve health outcomes, patients' and families' experiences and quality across the continuum of care, and health system sustainability. When SCNs launch, they measure current health status and the performance of the healthcare (and social support) system. Working with patients, clinicians, operational leaders and other stakeholders, they identify gaps and opportunities and prioritize specific areas for action. This work is summarized in a transformational roadmap, which each SCN creates in its first 18 months.

The SCNs take action to address these priorities by reviewing existing evidence and working with operational leaders, communities and researchers to (1) operationalize and spread interventions shown to work locally or in other regions, or (2) co-design innovative solutions to overcome gaps, improve patient outcomes, and reduce healthcare costs. The networks rely on evidence and measurement to inform decision making, and they develop detailed project, implementation and evaluation plans in partnership with operations, zones, patient and family advisors, and others. If the evaluation shows improved outcomes and/or cost savings, then programs are scaled and spread provincially as appropriate. This step is achieved in partnership with quality improvement and operational teams, primary care and other health and community partners.

Having a single, province-wide health system is an asset that enables all stakeholders to work together, maximize available resources and manage change on a provincial scale. By removing administrative barriers and creating opportunities to collaborate across zones, the networks are able to share ideas and work together to develop solutions that improve access to health services, reduce unwarranted variation, and support local and system-wide improvements.

engage

measure

prioritize

design

test

evaluate

implement

The SCNs...facilitate innovation in the system... and promote new thinking.

Alberta Health, 2018

I am encouraged by the SCN leaders and...excited to participate in the things that will move us forward in the future.

AHS Operational Leader, 2018

Our track record of patient-centered care and collaboration

The SCNs have become an important resource for Alberta's health system by mobilizing teams of knowledgeable and committed people to take on challenges, enable change and advance health and care in every part of the province.

The projects completed to date have had a significant impact across the spectrum of the Quadruple Aim. Ten of these projects are profiled in the SCN Retrospective (2019), which shows how this work is making a difference in the lives of Albertans, improving health outcomes and providing a positive return on investment for Alberta's health system. The profiles also highlight how partnerships have enabled this work and are essential to successfully operationalize system-wide improvements.

Over the past seven years, this work has created positive change within Alberta's health system and helped build momentum for future health system improvement. Presently, there are about 50 active SCN projects underway, involving more than 150 patient and family advisors and all zones. Together with operations, the networks are working to address complex challenges that cross all health disciplines, including access to surgery and specialist care, pain and chronic disease.

Lessons learned: Evolving and adapting to maximize impact

Bringing together diverse stakeholder perspectives has proven key to delivering maximum impact. Our track record shows the potential these partnerships have and the impact we can achieve through integrated, evidence-based approaches. As the SCNs have matured and gained experience, we've come to understand:

- the value of these *partnerships* and the importance of *leadership* and strong relationships with patients, families, frontline staff, clinicians, operational leaders, and researchers
- the need for clear priority-setting and *focus*
- the benefits and challenges of working together, and the need to *communicate* efficiently and effectively, and listen to all stakeholders
- the need to *balance* provincial goals and priorities with local needs
- that *data, rigorous evaluation and reporting* are essential to drive changes in practice
- the need for *agile* environments that allow teams to mobilize the resources they need to innovate, fail fast, adapt and move on, or spread and scale successful initiatives provincially
- the importance of *joint planning* with operational leaders, managers and staff on how to implement projects, and the need to align our efforts and resources
- what works when it comes to *spreading and scaling* successful innovations and *sustaining* them over time, and how we can enable and support these goals

The Quadruple Aim – Improving health outcomes that matter to the people of Alberta

1 Improving patients' and families' experiences

Faster diagnosis of breast cancers

- Shorter wait times for confirmed diagnosis (from 19 to 6 days)
- Patient satisfaction now greater than 90%

Greater involvement of patients and families in care teams

- Safeguards to ensure critical information shared prior to surgery
- Improved patient safety; more than 10,000 medical errors avoided each year

Integrated care pathways and expanded support for

- people with opioid use disorder (virtual care, bup-nal initiation in emergency departments, community referrals)
- long-term care residents (improved screening for urgent transfers)
- people with chronic conditions such as osteoarthritis and diabetes

Improved access to health services for rural and First Nations communities

- Pre- and post-natal care, stroke care and rehabilitation services
- Indigenous patient navigators to address barriers and inequities

2 Improving patient and population health outcomes

Fewer complications, more consistent screening for delirium in intensive care patients

- 10% fewer days patients in intensive care units experience delirium

Improved stroke outcomes and access to best-in-class care

- Shorter door-to-needle times
- Rapid clinical evaluation and treatment and access to rehabilitation
- 28% fewer patients admitted to long-term care

High-quality, evidence-based care across all sites

- Reducing unwarranted variation and improved consistency through best practices, standard order sets, care and referral pathways, and quality indicators

Reduced risk of injury and chronic disease through

- improved screening and follow-up (e.g., diabetic foot ulcers, bone fractures)
- community-level supports (e.g., people with hip and knee osteoarthritis)
- online resources, partnerships (Alberta Community Health Dashboard)

3 Improving value and health system sustainability

Improved capacity and reduced length of stay

- Enhanced care before and after surgery shortens hospital stays by 1 to 2 days

▶▶▶▶ return on investment is \$2.1 to \$3.8 for every \$1 invested

- Early treatment and better rehab reduces length of stay and long-term disabilities

▶▶▶▶ \$3.3 million annual savings

- Nearly half (46%) of breast cancer surgeries are now performed as day surgeries (up from 5% in 2014/15)
- Reductions in ICU delirium and lower limb amputations (in zones implementing integrated care) reduces hospital stays

▶▶▶▶ combined savings of more than \$5.5 million per year

Removal of low-value practices

- Use of best evidence to ensure patient safety, appropriate use of tests and treatments
- Discontinued use of fetal fibronectin laboratory test and replaced it with clinical assessment tools to assess risk of preterm births

▶▶▶▶ \$12.5 million in cost savings

Preventative strategies that support long-term health sustainability

- Enhanced screening through Catch-a-Break is helping prevent hip fractures and other common fractures in patients with osteoporosis

4 Improving the experience and safety of our people

Improved efficiency and communication

- More efficient processes for referrals, imaging, reporting, and better communication between care providers (e.g., breast health, acute care, high risk foot teams)
- Better coordinated stroke services – from rapid evaluation and intervention to rehabilitation

Integrated, team-based care

- Improved access to specialist care (e.g., gastrointestinal, bone and joint, addiction and mental health services)
- Better access to information and resources increases provider confidence (e.g., diabetic foot screening)
- Improved morale through partnerships, engagement and multidisciplinary approaches (e.g., emergency staff better able to help patients access community supports)

Defining a path forward: The 2019-2024 SCN Roadmap

In defining the strategic direction for the networks for the next five years, we recognize the importance of

- continuing to align with the AHS vision, mission and values and support the goals of the *2017–2020 AHS Health and Business Plan*
- aligning with the strategic direction and outcomes defined in the *Alberta Health Business Plan 2018– 2021* (March 2018)
- supporting and informing operational priorities on a local and provincial scale, including health service integration and enhanced care in the community
- leveraging opportunities created by system-wide investments such as Connect Care, and support the implementation of a province-wide clinical information system
- advancing health research and innovation that meets the needs of all Albertans
- focusing on operational partnerships and strengthening relationships across networks and with all stakeholders
- ensuring the networks have the structures, processes and supports in place to achieve these goals

The 2019-2024 Roadmap identifies seven collective areas of focus that will inform the actions of Alberta's SCNs over the next five years. These areas of focus align with our mission and reflect shared goals and priorities to significantly impact health in our province. Likewise, these areas of focus, and the actions to support them, reflect system-wide challenges, priorities and accountabilities. They leverage the strengths of the networks and build on work to date. Most importantly, they reflect the input, priorities and recommendations of network stakeholders from across Alberta, including patient and family advisors, operational leaders and managers, Alberta Health, SCN leaders, academic partners, and others.

In developing a five-year action plan, the SCNs launched a comprehensive consultation and engagement process that included focus groups, meetings with SCN leaders, input from core committees and patient and family advisors, and interviews with nearly 50 network stakeholders. We shared the draft plan at a series of meetings and received feedback from more than 200 individuals. This input was used to refine the draft areas of focus, objectives and actions. We have an implementation plan and accountability framework for this Roadmap that was developed in collaboration with the networks.

1 Engage the people of Alberta

Patient-focused care and decision making is a cornerstone of high-performing health systems and is the driving force behind everything we do. This will continue to be a focus for the networks, and we commit to strengthening our relationships with patient and family advisors, engaging them as equal partners in decision-making, supporting them as they make important contributions, and prioritizing work that improves health outcomes and patients' and families' experiences.

2 Strengthen our connections

Connectedness is at the heart of clinical networks and enables us to achieve the best outcomes. The 2019–2024 SCN Roadmap identifies opportunities to expand and strengthen those relationships, improve communication, and align our planning processes to better engage and support all stakeholders and reduce fragmentation across the system.

3 Support integrated care across the patient journey

Moving towards a more integrated health system supports whole-patient approaches and creates linkages that improve the continuity of care and access to specialty care. These changes are critical to ensure every Albertan has access to the right care at the right time from the right provider. The SCNs will support health system integration and collaboration across service providers. Working with stakeholders across the province, we will prioritize whole-patient approaches and integrated care models.

4 Promote wellness, prevention and population health

Health systems, communities and governments recognize the need to develop strategies that focus on disease and injury prevention, keeping people well and supporting

community-led initiatives that address underlying needs and social determinants of health. Over the next five years, the networks will work together to support health promotion and prevention, track population health indicators, and partner with provincial agencies and First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities to improve population health and health equity.

5 Improve value and sustainability

The networks are working to support the long-term sustainability of our health system by identifying and eliminating practices that do not provide value to the people of Alberta, by supporting clinical appropriateness, and by leading and supporting efforts to develop indicators, accountability structures and incentives that support high-value care.

6 Advance health research and innovation

The SCNs are committed to identifying, evaluating and advancing innovative solutions (e.g., programs, services, care pathways, guidelines) that meet the needs of Albertans. We recognize the importance of embedding research into daily clinical practice and will work to build capacity to accelerate and advance health innovations that address the needs of Albertans.

7 Support our people and processes

In creating this Roadmap, we heard from stakeholders across the province and came away understanding that we need to embed a culture of ongoing evaluation into our work, learn from our experience, and continue to refine and strengthen our tools, structures and processes across the networks to support all stakeholders and deliver maximum value to Albertans. We recognize the need to share best practices across networks and focus on continuous improvement to enable all SCNs to better support care and improve outcomes.

Areas of focus and objectives

By committing to these areas of focus, and identifying specific objectives and actions for each of them, the networks are confident that, together, we will advance care and achieve tangible outcomes that improve health outcomes for 4.3 million Albertans.

Areas of focus	Objectives
1. Engage the people of Alberta	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Actively involve patients, families and the people of Alberta in co-designing strategies and models of care that improve their health, care and well-being. Maintain connections with people who have lived experience and invite their participation in network activities. 2. Prioritize work that improves patient-important outcomes and patient experience. 3. Expand our capacity to engage diverse stakeholders, and develop tools and processes that support successful engagement.
2. Strengthen our connections	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize and support all stakeholders as network members. Commit to building united and high-performing communities of practice by focusing on our common vision, values and goals, and aligning our efforts, to the greatest extent possible. 2. Together with key stakeholders, clinicians and decision makers, develop strategies that encourage ongoing collaboration and support of mutually prioritized projects. 3. Work together to align planning cycles and priority setting among stakeholders. Identify opportunities to share priorities, exchange ideas, and clarify roles and responsibilities, accessing existing structures and meetings where possible (e.g., AHS Quality Safety Outcomes Committee). 4. Encourage proactive, efficient, and reciprocal communication across the networks, and evaluate the effectiveness of communication practices on a local and system level.
3. Support integrated care across the patient journey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prioritize whole-patient approaches and integrated, multidisciplinary care models that improve continuity of care. 2. Support efforts that improve access to specialty care and linkages between health service providers to ensure all Albertans get the right care, at the right time, with the right provider. 3. Use data to drive decision-making and partner with universities, care providers and other stakeholders to translate evidence into practice.
4. Promote wellness, prevention and population health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collaborate across networks on disease prevention and health promotion. 2. Identify opportunities to impact the health and wellness of 4.3 million Albertans.
5. Improve value and sustainability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enable all health providers to embed appropriateness and value into daily care and practice. 2. Create mechanisms to measure high-value care and use these to monitor outcomes, inform practice change, and evaluate return on investment. Work to eliminate practices that do not provide value to the people of Alberta 3. Align incentives and accountability structures to support high-value care.
6. Advance health research and innovation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embrace and promote a culture of innovation across Alberta's health system that responds to the needs of Albertans. 2. Work together to create a high-performing health system that embeds innovation and quality improvement into daily practice. 3. Build capacity to accelerate and advance health innovations that address the needs of Albertans.
7. Support our people and processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evaluate and refine tools, structures and processes across the networks to support all stakeholders and deliver the greatest value to Albertans.

Implementation plan

Each objective outlined is paired with specific actions the networks will take, individually or collectively, to achieve the Roadmap objectives. The SCN leadership team has worked with each network to develop a comprehensive implementation plan that will include measurement and evaluation to track our progress toward these actions and objectives. The implementation plan defines accountabilities, identifies and assigns resources and outlines deliverables for the next year.

In our discussions with stakeholders, we heard the need for proactive, open and clear communication across networks and among all stakeholders. We also heard the need for greater transparency regarding priorities, needs and objectives. Work has begun to develop a pan-SCN communication strategy that will support effective communication and reporting going forward.



We have also begun to build and nurture the relationships and connections we will need to successfully execute this plan. We have met with primary health care leaders across Alberta to strengthen and renew our partnership and we will look to further strengthen our relationships with communities across the province, zone operations and frontline care providers in the months to come.

As we enter this next phase, we remain committed to supporting the Quadruple Aim, the vision, mission and values of AHS, and the health and well being of all Albertans.

AHS Vision

Healthy Albertans.
Healthy Communities.
Together.

AHS Mission

To provide a patient-focused quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

AHS Values



compassion accountability
respect excellence safety