Interprofessional Collaboration as a Catalyst for Change
A Personal Opinion Paper

Steven J. Hoffman

Healthcare is changing. Gone are the days of isolated professional silos and provider-centricity. The consumers of health care are now demanding quality services from a range of health professionals, delivered by those who they believe are best qualified to provide it. Today’s patients have little patience for hierarchy, turf wars or miscommunication among the various health professionals they consult, and the research evidence shows that any of these aggravations may also affect their health care outcomes.

The future will undoubtedly feature changes to the way health professionals practice. The world simply does not have enough of them, nor are they mixed or distributed evenly (or equitably) among the places where they are needed. According to the World Health Organization, we currently lack 4.3 million health workers worldwide; 36 of the 57 countries with severe shortages are on the African continent (1). While the global health community is largely focused on “scaling-up” the production of health workers, the sheer numbers dictate that a quick resolution to this crisis may not be possible without changes to the way we educate health professionals or the way in which they practice. Indeed, the 59th World Health Assembly in 2006 called for the development of “innovative approaches to teaching [health professionals]” (2), and many groups – such as the Global Health Workforce Alliance – have been tasked with meeting this challenge.

One innovative strategy recently endorsed by the World Health Organization (3) is interprofessional collaboration, which is a patient-centred, team-based approach to health care delivery that synergistically maximizes the strengths and skills of each contributing health professional (4). The goal of this approach is to optimize both the quality and efficiency of health care systems. Research shows that successful interprofessional care can result in fewer errors, lower patient mortality rates, fewer hospitalizations, enhanced patient satisfaction (5), and increased staff motivation, well-being and retention (6). While teamwork in health care is not a new idea, perhaps advances in communication technologies (e.g., electronic health record) and our understanding of organizational behaviour (e.g., on issues related to power and hierarchy) will help us achieve a level of collaboration that had previously been impossible. Regardless, it is clear that this paradigm is the future face of
health care as it has the potential to radically transform health professional practice for the better so that upcoming health needs can be met efficiently and effectively with quality health care services.

This radical transformation in health care delivery, however, will not only take place in the practice setting. Great changes to every system-level structure supporting health professionals will be necessary to foster and facilitate this fundamentally different way of providing health care. Changes will soon be seen in the regulatory and accountability systems, as well as in the leadership, governance and remuneration of health care teams. Institutional processes and medico-legal liability systems will also have to adapt to a future with collaborative decision-making where all team members are jointly responsible for their own mistakes and those of their colleagues. But perhaps the greatest changes will take place in the education sector, where interprofessional education will increasingly be mandated to ensure that the next generation of health professionals have the knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary to work collaboratively. In many places it is these health professional students who are advocating for change and championing this approach (4).

Several countries have already taken bold steps to move toward this direction. Governments in Canada and the United Kingdom, for example, have recently invested millions of dollars to create an interprofessional workforce and make the necessary changes to support it. International networks of educators, researchers and policymakers now exist in several countries and regions (including Australasia, Canada, Europe, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom), and numerous centres of excellence in interprofessional education have been established at universities in every part of the world. The World Health Organization has also recently launched a study group on this issue to advance interprofessional education and collaborative practice internationally (3). Global momentum has already taken hold.

Interprofessional collaboration will be the future face of health care and will catalyze revolutionary changes to the various structures that support it. This is indeed an exciting time for health care and health professionals. Let us work together for better health and make collaborative practice a reality.