

Barriers to healthcare services among recent immigrants in Canadian cities

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In Canada, foreign-born individuals account for 20% of the total population.¹ Compared to the Canadian-born population, recent immigrants to Canada are generally healthier.^{1,2} This phenomenon has been well-documented and has been coined the “healthy immigrant effect”, which occurs when individuals’ health advantages decline as their duration of time in the host country lengthens.^{2,3} The healthy immigrant effect has been attributed to various factors including the underutilization of healthcare services.³ In particular, language, cultural, and healthcare accessibility barriers may contribute to this issue, especially for immigrants settling in urban areas.^{4,5} Consequently, this may result in the decline of immigrants’ health after extended-time living in Canada.⁴

Communication and Language Barriers

Immigrants who lack proficiency in Canada’s national languages (i.e., English or French) may have difficulty navigating the healthcare system.⁶ Approximately 66% of male and 52% of female immigrants rated their language proficiency as ‘persistently good’ after 6-months in Canada,⁶ leaving a significant proportion of immigrants with communication difficulties. Ultimately, language barriers may influence the ways immigrants interact with or utilize medical services.³ After four years in Canada, immigrants reporting poor health increased from 5% to 12% for males and from 8% to 21% for females with limited language proficiency.⁶ Furthermore, a common issue that occurs in multicultural cities across Canada is the lack of physicians that speak the patient’s native language.⁵ Due to a lack of resources, interpretation services are often not provided in primary care, but are available at hospitals to various extents.^{7,8} Unfortunately, reductions in funding have decreased a substantial amount of community-based health and social services provided by hospitals and healthcare practices devoted to immigrant health.⁷

In order to overcome these barriers, an increase in health literacy as well as language proficiency among newcomers to Canada is crucial. Involving immigrants in community-based healthcare awareness programs is one possible avenue to both promote health education as well as improve language proficiency. In addition, designing print materials that are offered in a variety of languages in healthcare practices, and community-based programs that advocate for immigrants’ health can circumvent language barriers while educating.

Cultural Barriers

Meeting the cultural needs of everyone who utilizes the Canadian healthcare system is a persistent issue. In addition to preferences for a male or female physician, Western-based medical approaches may not meet the needs of immigrant populations in a holistic or traditional way.⁵ As a result, cultural beliefs, expectations or practices may exist that influence newcomers’ behaviours toward accessing medical services.² For example, 59% of Chinese immigrants prefer to have physicians that speak their native language because of difficulty communicating their symptoms, especially if they are accustomed to describing their symptoms in terms of good or bad ‘chi’.⁸ It is crucial to consider individuals’ cultural beliefs and values when providing health services due to immigrants’ low levels of acculturation and familiarity of Western-based healthcare practices and/or medicine. Although immigrants can find physicians’ information through government websites, there is a lack of culturally-matched physicians.^{5,8} Therefore, communities and their members should help advocate for individuals by matching those with culturally-specific needs with appropriate physicians. ►

Access to Healthcare Barriers

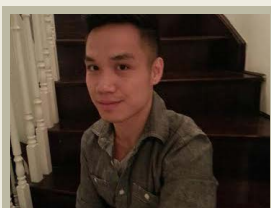
Immigrants are more likely to access healthcare services if culturally appropriate care were located within a close proximity^{5,8}. As such, public transit may act as a barrier for those without access to a car. Consequently, locating a physician that is within reasonable travel distance may be difficult for recent immigrants⁵. Moreover, the concentrations of physicians in Canadian cities may reveal a spatial mismatch between physicians and immigrant populations.⁸ In other words, there is a shortage of culturally-matched physicians in close proximity to immigrants' home and work^{8,9}. Therefore, location of practice and travel time/distance may be significant factors for recent immigrants when deciding to seek medical services. Policymakers should be aware of the potential spatial barriers when recruiting physicians to specific communities, thus, reorienting healthcare services to meet the travel needs of those in the community.

Increasing Healthcare Utilization via Health Promotion

From a health promotion perspective, it is necessary to increase an individual's control over his/her own health by modifying factors (e.g., policies and services) that help individuals navigate the Canadian healthcare system¹⁰. Identifying barriers that recent immigrants face should be a goal for all healthcare providers and policymakers to ensure a healthy immigrant population in Canada. Some of the most notable concerns relate to lack of language, cultural understanding, and accessibility. In order for Canadian cities to sustain the health of the immigrant population, a multifaceted approach must be established for healthcare practitioners, policy makers, and immigrants to collaborate and promote better access to healthcare services. ■

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