

CONSULTATIONS WITH DOCTORS AND NURSES

by Gisèle Carrière

The Canada Health Act guarantees universal access to health care. However, the type of services that Canadians actually use varies. Changes to health care delivery have resulted in shifts in consultation venues for health care professionals—especially nurses.

Most have family doctor or GP

In 2003, an estimated 86% of Canadians aged 12 and older—about 23 million people—reported that they had a “regular” medical doctor. Even if they did not, just over three-quarters of people these ages (77%) said they had consulted a family physician or a general practitioner (GP) at least once in the past year. As well, 11% reported having consulted a nurse.

Predictably, older Canadians were more likely than younger people to have seen or talked to a family physician or GP. By contrast, having had at least one consultation with a nurse was more likely in early adulthood.

At nearly all ages, the proportion of females who consulted family physicians/GPs or nurses at least once was greater than that for males. Nurse visits among seniors were the exception. While women aged 65 or older

were still more likely than their male counterparts to have sought care from those types of physicians, the proportion of seniors who consulted a nurse at least once did not differ by sex (data not shown).

Residents of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Québec were less likely than Canadians overall to have consulted a family physician/GP. Lower proportions of people in the Northwest Territories and Québec had a regular medical doctor, compared with Canadians overall (data not shown). But larger proportions of people in the territories and Québec had consulted a nurse at least once, which may reflect a greater reliance on nurses for primary health care.

Income differences

The likelihood of consulting a family physician/GP varied little according to household income, although reporting at least one consultation with these physicians was slightly more common for people in the highest income category and slightly less common for those in the lowest one (Table A). Similarly, post-secondary graduates were more likely to have consulted a physician, compared with Canadians overall.

These findings were somewhat surprising, given the well-known relationship between low socio-

Percentage of population aged 12 or older who consulted a family physician, general practitioner or nurse at least once in past 12 months

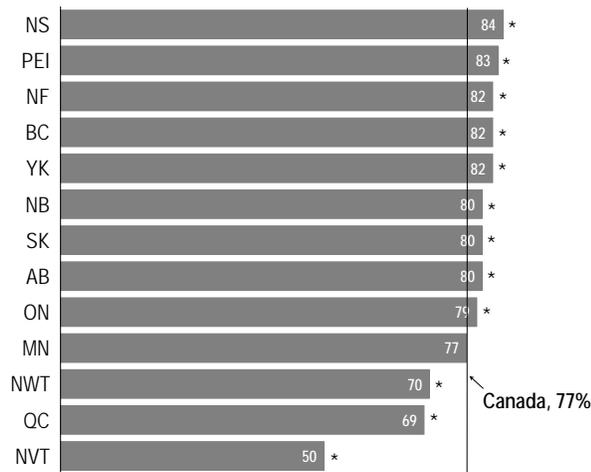
	Consulted family physician† or general practitioner		Consulted nurse	
	'000	%	'000	%
Canada	20,433	77	2,881	11
Males	9,331	72*	1,141	9*
Females‡	11,102	83	1,740	13
Total, aged 12 or older†				
12-19	2,292	70*	383	12*
20-34	4,541	72*	879	14*
35-44	3,992	76*	502	9*
45-64	6,295	80*	699	9*
65+	3,312	88*	419	11
Total, education†				
Less than secondary graduation	5,215	76*	748	11
Secondary graduation	3,582	76*	456	10*
Some postsecondary	1,540	77	234	12
Postsecondary graduation	9,676	79*	1,393	11*
Residence				
Urban	16,680	78*	2,290	11*
Rural‡	3,753	75	591	12

Data source: 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey
 † Includes consultations with pediatricians for respondents younger than 18.
 ‡ Reference group
 * Significantly different from estimate for reference group (p < 0.05)

economic status and poor health. But the data reflect only the proportion of people who consulted a doctor at least once during the previous year, not the volume or frequency of contacts. Once-a-year visits to physicians for check-ups and preventive screening probably contributed to the modestly

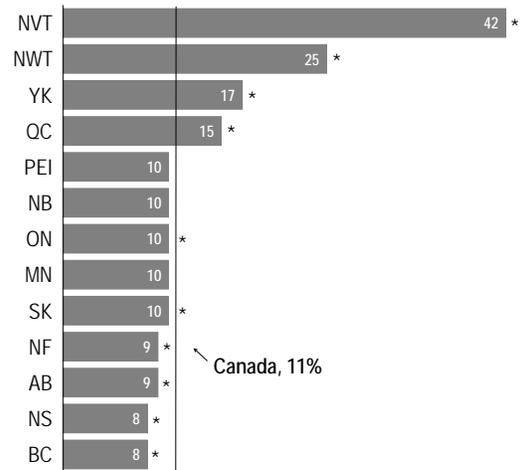
higher proportions of people with higher levels of income and education who had consulted a doctor. By contrast, contacts with a nurse were slightly more likely among people in lower-income households than among those with greater means.

Percentage of population aged 12 or older who consulted a family physician[†] or general practitioner at least once in past 12 months



Data source: 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey
[†] Includes consultations with pediatricians for respondents younger than 18.
 * Significantly different from estimate for Canada ($p < 0.05$)

Percentage of population aged 12 or older who consulted a nurse at least once in past 12 months



Data source: 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey
 * Significantly different from estimate for Canada ($p < 0.05$)

Percentage of population aged 12 or older who consulted a nurse in past 12 months, by most common location of most recent consultation

	2000/01		2003	
		%		%
Canada	Home	2	Telephone	2*
Newfoundland and Labrador	Home	2	Hospital outpatient	2
Prince Edward Island	Doctor's office	2	Doctor's office	3
Nova Scotia	Home	2	Hospital outpatient	2*
New Brunswick	Home	2	Telephone	2
Québec	Community Health Centre	4	Community Health Centre	5
Ontario	Home	2	Telephone	3*
Manitoba	Home	2	Telephone	2 ^E
Saskatchewan	Home	2	Home	2
Alberta	Community Health Centre	2	Telephone	2*
British Columbia	Home	1	Home	1
Yukon	Community Health Centre	10	Community Health Centre	7 ^E
Northwest Territories	Community Health Centre	19	Community Health Centre	10* ^E
Nunavut	Community Health Centre	38	Community Health Centre	30 ^E

Data source: 2000/01 and 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey
 * Significantly different from estimate for the same location in 2000/01 ($p < 0.05$)
^E Coefficient of variation 16.6% to 33.3% (interpret with caution)

Telephone help-lines

To some extent, the settings in which people receive care depend on where they live. In Québec, for example, nurses and other professionals working in community clinics provide first-line health care services. Residents of the North receive much of their basic health care in nursing stations. And in some jurisdictions, “telephone triage” services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week so that people can speak to a nurse and receive advice over the telephone.¹

Overall, 11% of Canadians aged 12 or older (nearly 2.9 million people) consulted a nurse at least once in 2003. Although contacts with nurses occurred in a variety of settings, respondents were most likely to say that the most recent consultation took place over the telephone. Just two years earlier, according to the 2001 CCHS, a client’s home had been the most likely place for the most recent consultation with a nurse. This shift to telephone nursing consultations essentially reflects the situation in Ontario and Alberta, where telephone help-lines have been implemented to facilitate access.

In Nova Scotia, the most frequently reported location of the most recent nursing contact shifted

from home in 2001 to hospital outpatient departments in 2003. In the Northwest Territories, the proportion consulting nurses in a community health centre dropped by almost half, but this venue remained the most commonly reported location for the most recent nurse consultation.

The Questions

Information about *consultations with family doctors/general practitioners* is based on responses to the following question: “In the past 12 months, how many times have you seen, or talked on the telephone about your physical, emotional or mental health with a family doctor [includes pediatricians for respondents aged less than 18] or general practitioner?” Virtually the same question was asked about *consultations with nurses*. Respondents who indicated doctor or nurse consultations were asked where the most recent contact had taken place.

Data source

Information about consultations with family physicians (including pediatricians), general practitioners, and nurses is from the 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS).² Information about consultations with nurses was also obtained from the 2000/01 CCHS. The CCHS is a general health survey that covers the household population 12 or older. It does not include residents of Indian reserves, Canadian Forces bases, and some remote areas. The overall response rate was 84.7% in 2000/01 and 80.6% in 2003. The respective sample sizes were 131,535 and 135,573.

Variance on estimates, and on differences between estimates, was calculated using the bootstrap technique, which accounts for the complex sampling design of the surveys.^{3,4}

The data were weighted to estimate the number and percentage of Canadians who had contact with doctors or nurses at least once in the previous 12 months. The estimates do not represent the total number of visits that occurred.

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References

- 1 Canadian Institute for Health Information. *Health Care in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2003.
- 2 Béland Y. Canadian Community Health Survey—methodological overview. *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 82-003) 2002; 13(3): 9-14.
- 3 Rao JNK, Wu CFJ, Yue K. Some recent work on resampling methods for complex surveys. *Survey Methodology* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 12-001) 1992; 18(2): 209-17.
- 4 Rust KF, Rao JNK. Variance estimation for complex surveys using replication techniques. *Statistical Methods in Medical Research* 1996; 5: 281-310.

Table A

Percentage of population who consulted a family physician, general practitioner or nurse at least once in past 12 months, by household income, household population aged 12 or older, Canada, 2003

	Consulted family physician [†] or general practitioner		Consulted nurse	
	'000	%	'000	%
Canada [‡]	17,066	77	2,427	11
Lowest	470	75*	79	13*
Lower-middle	1,049	77	182	13*
Middle	3,360	77	482	11
Upper-middle	5,841	77	820	11
Highest	6,346	78*	864	11

Data source: 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey

[†] Includes consultations with pediatricians for respondents younger than 18.

[‡] Reference group

* Significantly different from estimate for Canada ($p < 0.05$)