

News Release

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Getting the health information you need *It's okay to ask*

Calgary AB – Albertans now have a new tool to help them get the most from their health care experience thanks to a report released today by the Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA). The HQCA's fourth biennial Health Report to Albertans, called *It's Okay to Ask*, encourages patients to partner with their health care providers to speak up and take action to get the health information they need. This publication follows our 2007 report entitled *Playing It Safe*, which focused on Albertans taking a more active role in their medication safety.

It's Okay to Ask is an important step towards a healthier tomorrow because low health literacy is a problem in 55% of the Canadian population between the ages of 16 and 65 and is higher in those over 65.¹ That means most Canadians do not understand how to read nutrition labels, follow medication directions, understand safety instructions or make informed choices for their well-being. *It's Okay to Ask* advises patients to be open and honest and ask for clarification when they don't understand something completely. It gives patients helpful tools to track their symptoms and medications and also provides helpful questions to ask about their health concerns, treatment choices and lifestyle changes.

"When the responsibility for health care decisions is shared, the outcome is better for everyone involved but especially the patient," says Dr. John Cowell, Chief Executive Officer of the HQCA. "You, the patient, are one of the most important members of your health care team and that's why it's okay to ask all the questions you need to make an informed decision."

An important part of taking action is to speak up. *It's Okay to Ask* helps patients plan before they visit their health care practitioner by providing tips on what to discuss during the visit to increase understanding of their health concern. The publication also includes suggestions on what patients can do to follow up after the visit to better manage their health. Guidelines such as filling out a simple symptom tracker and a list of the top five questions to ask a health care practitioner will help Albertans become better advocates for their health or the health of their loved ones.

A planned and well thought out trip to the doctor or another health care provider is time well spent. Taking the time to read through *It's Okay to Ask* and following some simple guidelines will help patients get the care they need sooner and will open the door to clear and open dialogue with their practitioner for their immediate and future health care needs.

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According to a patient safety survey the HQCA released in 2005, mistakes with medications were the second most common error reported by patients. That is why *It's Okay to Ask* talks about how to get the most out of medication, how to talk to a pharmacist and where to go for help when a pharmacist isn't available. There is a checklist to ensure patients get the full benefit from prescribed medications and tips on how to include the pharmacist in the patient's health care team.

The HQCA will distribute copies of *It's Okay to Ask* provincewide through various channels including newspaper inserts. Health care providers including all regulated health professions have received notice of the publication and where they may obtain copies. There will also be a print campaign in daily and weekly newspapers and selected magazines to increase awareness among Albertans. Copies of *It's Okay to Ask* are also available at www.hqca.ca or by calling the HQCA office at 403-297-8162.

About the HQCA

As an independent organization legislated under the Regional Health Authorities Act, the Health Quality Council of Alberta gathers and analyzes information and collaborates with Alberta Health Services, the health professions and Alberta Health and Wellness to translate that knowledge into practical improvements to the quality and safety of the health care Albertans receive.

¹Canadian Council on Learning. "State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency," *Report on Learning in Canada 2007* (Ottawa: 2007), pages 50-51.

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