

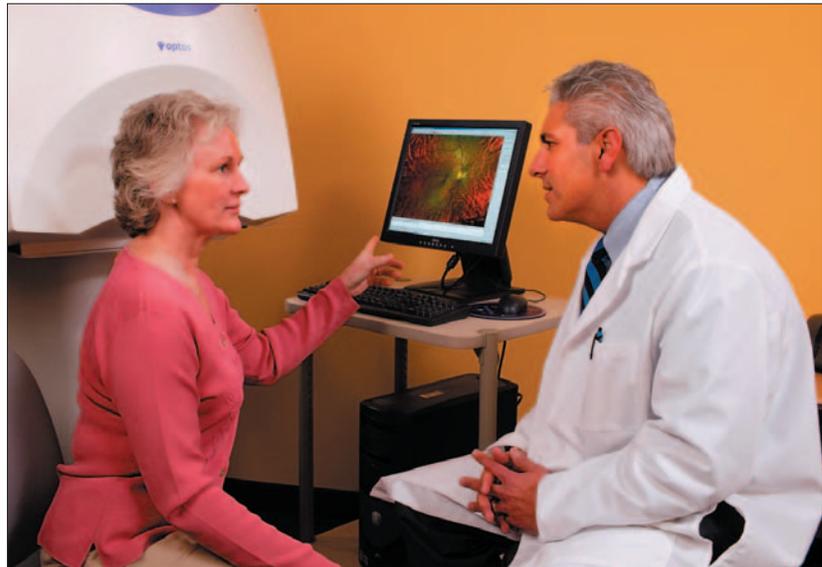
# The Max Bell Foundation:

Acting to reduce wait times in health care

## Contributing to good policy in health care

One of the difficult challenges facing Canadian health policy makers who are trying to improve health care by reducing wait times for medical treatment is to know what solutions work best for people. In Alberta, a private foundation helped launch an evaluation of the provincial government's bold experiment in reducing wait times for orthopaedic surgery. The Max Bell Foundation's funding is supporting an intensive analysis of the benefits of the provincial experiment. This initiative is an example of the largely unrecognized role that private foundations can play in evaluating policy options for the public sector.

In 2005, the Alberta government funded a pilot program to accelerate access to hip and knee replacement surgery, one of the most effective medical treatments to relieve pain and restore mobility among a rapidly increasing segment of the population. The government provided \$20 million to the project coordinator, the non-profit Alberta Bone and Joint Institute, and its partners, to work with teams of doctors, surgeons and therapists in Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer. The teams focused on cutting patients' wait time between first consultation and final surgery to about 19 weeks instead of the traditional 90 weeks, by developing a new "care pathway" with improved work patterns and efficiencies. The provincial funding supported 1,200 additional



Taking bold steps towards better health care

surgeries, but there was no long-term funding for the tracking of cost-benefit outcomes.

The Alberta Bone and Joint Institute realized it would need a long-term evaluation to determine if the accelerated surgeries could ultimately reduce system costs. Such evaluation includes measuring and quantifying the new system's effect on reducing pain and suffering, and time lost from work and regular activity for patients, as well as measuring the pressure on physicians, therapists, pharmacists and facilities, the benefit of quicker access, services and rehabilitation for urban versus rural patients and numerous other factors. Such an evaluation would involve several thousand citizens for up to four years. In health care, evaluations are part of the introduction of any new medical technique.

And without positive evaluations, health care professionals will not adopt new techniques, or policies. "In health care you can't change anything without detailed evaluation," says Dr. Don Dick, an orthopaedic surgeon and the Edmonton regional head of the Institute.

## More than just quick results: long-term reform

A four-year evaluation program was beyond the Alberta government's funding horizon. "Somebody had to do it", says Dr. Dick, "so we went to the Max Bell Foundation" and another private foundation in Calgary, the Norlien Foundation. "The foundations understood right away, both the need to change health care and the way to do it"

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adds Dick, who terms both private philanthropies "invaluable."

As Executive Director David Elton of the Max Bell Foundation explains, "It made sense. The government was interested in immediate results. But the real story isn't the reduction in wait times, it is whether it can be done more cost effectively." The two foundations committed \$800,000 for a three-year evaluation. The provincial government later contributed \$500,000.

The Calgary-based Max Bell Foundation has a 30-year record of supporting charitable initiatives ranging widely from public policy through health care, the Canada/Asia Pacific relationship, and education. It has come to emphasize the importance of

spreading knowledge about the new techniques or new ideas it has helped generate with its funding, particularly among practitioners and policy-makers. "We now insist there be adequate money for evaluation" included in all projects the Foundation funds, explains Elton. "It is not a matter of simply publicizing the outcome, but also understanding and sharing the results" -- which was precisely what the Bone and Joint Institute was seeking to do. "We think it increases the social value of what we do" as a foundation, says Elton. "If you want to deal with public policy, you'd better understand the outcomes of your initiatives."

By the end of 2005, the Alberta program of accelerated surgeries showed a marked reduction in patient wait times for consulta-

tions and surgeries, decreased post-operative hospitalization and increased patient satisfaction. In the short term, the program is visibly successful. The Alberta government has extended its funding for the experiment for another two years. And while specialists like Dr. Dick term the Institute's creation of special surgery teams "pretty clearly the new way to address these things," he says the biggest benefit will come if the long-term evaluation proves that the strategy is cost-effective. It is that kind of evaluation which will ensure its adoption as permanent policy, in Alberta and nationally, and applied to other classes of health care beyond hip and knee surgeries, says Dick.