

Chronic diseases costly for province

By: Jen Skerritt

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HEALTH officials are looking to beef up disease prevention after a new study found the province is spending billions to treat Manitobans with chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

A Manitoba Centre for Health Policy report, released Wednesday, reveals the province is shouldering massive health care costs to treat Manitobans suffering from chronic diseases including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, arthritis and asthma. Between 2005 and 2007, the province spent more than \$5.3 billion to pay for doctor visits, prescription drugs, home care and hospital stays for Manitobans living with these chronic conditions.

Researchers sifted through thousands of anonymous patient records and found more than half of Manitobans over age 19 live with a chronic disease. Similar studies done in other provinces have found between 40 and 60 per cent of health care expenditures go towards treating people with chronic conditions -- up to 40 per cent of which, could be prevented through better nutrition, affordable housing, not smoking and exercising regularly.

"That shows how big a deal it is," said lead researcher Greg Finlayson. "We're not talking about insignificant sums of money. When you have six out of 10 people in Manitoba with some kind of chronic disease it all adds up."

Healthy Living Minister Jim Rondeau said the report will help provincial officials target areas where more preventative health programs are needed. While Rondeau would not discuss specifics, he said the province plans to invest in specific projects to help reduce the burden of chronic diseases this year.

If programs can help increase access to healthy food, Rondeau said, for example, it could help delay the onset of diabetes or other costly chronic diseases.

"We're going to start looking at more programs," he said.

The report found that strokes had the lowest prevalence of all chronic diseases studied but the highest costs associated with treatment. It costs \$22,219 for all health care services for a stroke patient, about 8.2 times more than a patient who has not suffered a stroke.

The average cost of health care over two years for the 48,000 diabetics included in the study was \$14,000, compared to just \$6,400 for people who do not have diabetes.

According to the report, the price of treating chronic diseases varies across the province. The cost of treating a Winnipegger with heart disease was 6.5 times higher than treating a Winnipegger without heart disease. In the health region near Steinbach, the cost was only 5.7 times higher.

Finlayson said that shows there may be opportunities for some regional health authorities to cut their costs. For example, he said doctors in one region may be prescribing a drug to treat a chronic condition when a cheaper alternative is available.

In other areas, Finlayson said sick patients may have to stay in hospital longer because of lack of access to home care.