

Q&A with Lucie Allard

Member of Health Quality Ontario's Patient, Family and Public Advisors Council

In June, 2016, Lucie Allard traveled to Northern Ontario as a member of [Health Quality Ontario's Patient, Family and Public Advisors Council](#).

There, she met with health care providers and their patients - seeing firsthand the challenges both face.

She shares with us now her reflections, in light of the recent release of [Health in the North: A report on geography and the health of people in Ontario's two northern regions](#) - a Health Quality Ontario report that reveals significant gaps in health care for those living in the north.

You met with the people behind this data - both providers in these regions, as well as patients. Even at quick glance, this report shows significant discrepancies for people living in the north than is typical in the province overall. What are your impressions?

The bare bones data is shocking. This is shocking and disturbing – and it should be. These staggering discrepancies... it's a reflection of what I heard there. I heard it from the Elders, I heard it from those working at friendship centres, I heard it from those working at health centres, I heard it from a few patients themselves. What they described was, simply put, a state of real urgency.

There's an unnerving example related to avoidable deaths.

Yes – the data on potential years of life lost, related to premature death – by accident, suicide, or from disease or illness. According to the report: The North West LHIN region has nearly double Ontario's number overall of potential years of life lost due to avoidable deaths... the gap for the North East LHIN is also significant.

And while this is most definitely there – what has stayed with me is a real sense of hope. When I recall the various programs that I saw, the way engagement is being rethought, new approaches to reaching people who can be hard to reach.

My sense of hope comes from having visited centres like the Meno-Ya Win Health Centre in Sioux Lookout. It's a beautiful centre. And engagement there is present at every level, including in their governance structure.

Their Board includes representatives from various surrounding Aboriginal communities – and many of them play an important role in community relations. There are Elders who help guide the Board as well as patients. There are new programs that approach healing a mother with a drug addiction holistically – supporting her, her partner, her child, her mother – helping to heal a group of people who all depend on each other to live well.

We know that health outcomes are influenced by a lot more than the health system. Public health plays a huge role. Other social determinants of health - race, geography, language - play a huge role. How did you witness this?

Well. As we were waiting to board a small plane to Sioux Lookout, we were told we may not be able to land there. Stormy skies, they said. And this was a mild day in June.

But this is important. Part of the story is the health system, yes. But there's also the part where we know fresh fruits and vegetables often have a hard time making it to some parts of the province. And there's still, sadly, the part where we know people in this province don't have access to clean water.

This is the context – and that's sometimes difficult to show in a report. But you feel it when you're there. You feel the vastness of land. You feel the diversity within both the Aboriginal and Francophone populations. You feel the diversity of religion, of beliefs, of language... on-reserve, off-reserve, with road access, without road access – these create a diversity in a way that might affect access to education, or access to care.

You feel the importance of keeping an open mind. Of embracing an individual's needs, of empathizing in order to better understand what people's needs are. And I saw this there. Many efforts are still very new – but it's starting.

This will take time. I mean – look at these numbers.

These numbers may be new, but the story they tell is anything but. [Health Quality Ontario's yearly report](#) has captured parts of this story for several years - but, even anecdotally, we've heard of these gaps in health outcomes for much longer. The report calls it 'a stubborn trend.'

As a member of the public, how do you overcome feelings of being overwhelmed; of helplessness; of not knowing where to begin?

Well... I'm a stubborn person [laughs]. And though these issues are rarely portrayed in media as rooted in hope - I believe they are. When every sentence begins with 'the problem is-' – it becomes hard to move from there.

In sharing this report, and in becoming more aware of the reality, my hope is for us to also become more aware of the small successes that haven't yet had time to demonstrate impact - and help them grow.

There are so many new initiatives. So many new efforts to engage. To me, that's the most incredible part of the story.

Lucie Allard is a member of Health Quality Ontario's Patient, Family and Public Advisors Council. She is Francophone, and lives in southwestern Ontario.