Improved home care a prudent investment

WHEN SENIORS need help with daily tasks, should they leave their homes for personal-care institutions? The decision is often worrisome, even agonizing, for those seniors and their immediate families because it involves love, loyalty and the realization that transitioning to personal-care homes often signals the beginning of life’s final stage.

In Winnipeg, health officials plan to enhance home-care services to delay, and sometimes prevent, entry to personal-care homes. An analysis published Monday by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) validates the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority’s (WRHA) recent decision to focus on improving at-home services so seniors can stay longer in their residences. The CIHI study presents statistics that show it’s about time because, per capita, Manitoba has more seniors in personal-care homes than any of the other provinces studied.

In any discussion of this highly emotional topic, it’s wrong to demonize personal-care homes. They provide an important service for Manitobans who need the security offered by around-the-clock staff tending to health needs including medication monitoring, provision of nutritious meals and access to organized activities that allow for much-needed companionship. The problem comes when seniors who don’t need 24-hour-a-day care can’t secure the three-hour-a-day care that would allow them to stay in their homes. Often, residents are able to thrive in the comfort of their homes and communities if only they could get help with such basic functions as bathing and light household chores, including laundry and vacuuming.

The CIHI report shows that Manitoba has considerable room to improve when providing home-care services. In all the provinces studied, an average of 22 per cent of patients who entered nursing homes had needs that could have been met through home care. But in Winnipeg, the study found a significantly higher percentage — fully one-third of patients — fit this category.

As part of a major shakeup of medical services, the WRHA announced in April its plan to launch enhanced home-care services within six months. The new program will not attempt to provide continuous at-home care; instead, it will focus on providing intensive, short-term support for patients who often are shuttled from a hospital to a care home.

Although health care is about more than money, it is important at a time of escalating health costs that money be spent wisely. Many jurisdictions have found home care is a prudent investment that offers seniors and their families a practical alternative to more costly options. The actual cost savings vary greatly with the degree of home care provided, but it’s common for an individual’s home-care costs to be 30 to 40 per cent of the cost of placement in a personal-care home.

Of course, plans to improve home care in Manitoba could be hampered by Premier Brian Pallister’s continuing refusal to sign onto the federal government’s health-care agreement, which includes the distribution of $11 billion to participating provinces — including $400 million earmarked for Manitoba — over the next decade for home care and mental health.

Improving the home-care option will only become more important in the years ahead as the baby-boom generation ages to the point where extensive senior care is needed for a large demographic population bulge. Let people stay in their home-sweet-homes.
as long as possible. It’s good for the health of the patients and good for the health of the system.

Manitoba has room to improve on home care.

DREAMSTIME / TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE