Poverty: A Clinical Tool for Primary Care Providers (AB)

Poverty is not always apparent: In Alberta, 8.2% of families live in poverty.¹

1. **Screen Everyone**

“Do you ever have difficulty making ends meet at the end of the month?”
(Sensitivity 98%, specificity 40% for living below the poverty line)²

2. **Poverty is a Risk Factor**

Consider:
New immigrants, women, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ are among the highest risk groups.

Example 1:
If an otherwise healthy 35-year-old comes to your office, without risk factors for diabetes other than living in poverty, you consider ordering a screening test for diabetes.

Example 2:
If an otherwise low-risk patient who lives in poverty presents with chest pain, this elevates the pre-test probability of a cardiac source and helps determine how aggressive you are in ordering investigations.

3. **Intervene**

Ask Everyone: “Have you filled out and sent in your tax forms?”

- Ask questions to find out more about your patient—their employment, living situation, social supports, and the benefits they receive. Tax returns are required to access many income security benefits: e.g., GST / HST credits, child benefits, working income tax benefits, and property tax credits. Connect your patients to Free Community Tax Clinics.
- Even people without official residency status can file returns.
- Drug Coverage: All Albertans have access to prescription drug benefits through the Alberta government sponsored drug program. Visit drugcoverage.ca to see what benefits you may be eligible for.
Intervening can have a profound impact on your patients’ health

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<th>Patient Group</th>
<th>Ask</th>
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<td>Seniors</td>
<td>Individuals over age 65 who live in poverty should receive at least $1,200/month in income through OAS, GIS, and grants from filing a tax return.</td>
<td>Income supports can be obtained by applying for Canada Child Benefit when filing income tax returns. Eligible families can receive up to $6,400/year for each eligible child under the age of six, and $5,400/year for each eligible child aged 6 to 17. Families may be eligible for additional benefits through certain provincial programs. Eligible families can also receive $1,100/year for the first child. Additional benefits are available for additional children.</td>
<td>Start with Canada Benefits to identify and access income supports for patients and families. Use this in your office with patients and provide them with the link.</td>
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<td>Families with Children</td>
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<td>Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)</td>
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<td>Indigenous peoples registered under the Indian Act or recognized by the Inuit Land Claim organization can qualify for Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB), which pays for drugs and extended health benefits not covered by provincial plans.</td>
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<td>Social Assistance Recipients</td>
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<td>Additional benefits available include: transportation, medical supplies, special diet, employment supports, drug &amp; dental, vision, hearing, women in transition/interval houses, Advanced Age Allowance, community participation, special diets, and other discretionary benefits.</td>
<td>Speak with patients’ social services workers. Visit the Department of Human Services’ website to learn more about its programs and eligibility criteria.</td>
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<td>People with Disabilities</td>
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<td>Major disability programs available: CPP Disability, EI Sickness, Disability Tax Credit (DTC), Veterans Benefits, Workers’ Compensation Board of Alberta, Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDS). DTC can provide up to ~$1,800/year in tax savings (plus retroactive payments) and it is required to receive other benefits including the RDS, which provides up to $20,000 in grants.</td>
<td>Use a detailed social and medical history to determine the programs to which you can connect your patients. Complete forms such as: • Canada Revenue Agency Form T2201. The Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program provides financial and health-related assistance, including special diet funding for eligible adults with a disability.</td>
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Key Resources

**Canada Benefits**  
(www.canadabenefits.gc.ca)  
Provides a full listing of federal and provincial income and other supports, organized by personal status (e.g., “parent,” “Indigenous peoples”) or life situation (e.g., “unemployment,” “health concerns”), with links to the relevant program websites and to application forms.

**2-1-1**  
(www.ab.211.ca)  
Call 2-1-1 or browse the website to find community support and advocacy organizations, based on topic and location.

**LawCentral Alberta**  
(www.lawcentralalberta.ca)  
Provides law-related information and educational resources on justice and legal issues of interest to Albertans.

Remember: As health care providers, it is our responsibility to provide complete and detailed information that accurately portrays our patients’ health status and disabilities. It is NOT our role to serve as the gatekeepers for income security.
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