Alberta pharmacists have the broadest scope of practice in North America. As accessible healthcare providers in the primary care system, they play a significant role in preventing health conditions, managing disease conditions, treating minor ailments, increasing accessibility to health care, and enhancing patients' holistic well-being. This essay will focus on the primary and mental health and addiction care systems.

How Pharmacists Can Further Integrate into the Primary Care System

Primary health care (PHC) is the first point of healthcare; millions of Albertans access it regularly. PHC focuses on patient-centred care, building positive relationships with patients, collaboration between healthcare providers, managing chronic disease conditions, and providing preventive healthcare.

The Alberta Pharmacists' Association (RxA) advocates for the delivery of all these aspects of PHC. Hence, preparing care plans is a way of further interacting with patients and ensuring safe and effective medication use. A care plan documents the pharmacist and patients' responsibility to achieve patient goals. It highlights drug-related problems, medication reviews, recommendations, monitoring parameters and follow-up plans. By implementing the care plan, pharmacists can be more actively involved in managing chronic conditions and improving patients' health outcomes.

Pharmacists with additional prescribing authorization in Alberta can prescribe for certain minor ailments. They can assess patients, diagnose and provide recommendations leading to increased accessibility of care and prompt medical attention. Pharmacists can also refer patients to healthcare providers to support their overall health.

How I Would Contribute to Integrating into the Primary Care System

Collaboration with Healthcare Providers:

I would share information with other healthcare providers involved in the continuity of care to enhance patient care. For example, when I extend a prescription because the patient needs their medications and cannot see the doctor on time, I document my assessment and plan and then fax a prescription authorization request to the doctor. Also, I would assess for mental health conditions during patient interactions and refer them to the appropriate services.

Practicing Patient-Centred Care:

I would involve patients in developing individual treatment goals. In building a relationship with them, I would see the patient as an individual, not their medical condition. I must also adhere to the ethical standards of practice, such as maintaining confidentiality, building trust with patients, and upholding patients' autonomy. For example, patients with mental health and addiction issues can accept or reject treatment, and I need to respect their decisions. In addition, promoting patients' well-being is essential. I must assess for red flags when treating minor ailments and any side effects or concerns each time the patient picks up their medications or during follow-up.

How Pharmacists Can Further Integrate into the Mental Health and Addictions Care System

Mental health and addictions remain a growing challenge in Alberta, with substance use disorders and overdoses on the rise. These issues are worsened by the social barriers to healthcare and the inequalities many Albertans face. Hence, mental health issues must be addressed as a priority within the healthcare system by increasing the accessibility of mental healthcare services, reducing stigma and using a trauma-informed care approach.

The RxA has facilitated discussions about how pharmacists can provide mental health support in the pharmacy and build long-lasting therapeutic relationships with patients. Pharmacists can use open-ended questions and active listening techniques during medication reviews when interviewing patients, so they feel listened to and validated. During assessments, pharmacists can find out if patients are suicidal and if they have specific plans to harm themselves and if positive, be proactive by calling 911.

In addition, pharmacists must educate patients about their medical conditions, including how to understand them, adhere to medications, know when to expect improvement in symptoms or the full treatment benefits, identify side effects, and manage the side effects.

The RxA has honoured pharmacists who have shown dedication to supporting vulnerable people in the inner city. Pharmacists can further collaborate with community agencies, pharmacies, and healthcare professionals to ensure that people with mental health concerns and addictions stay on treatment.

How I would Contribute to Integrating into the Mental Health and Addiction Care

As a practicing pharmacist, I can contribute to this vision of promoting optimal mental health and addiction care by:

<u>Reducing Social Barriers:</u>

Learning about the social and economic factors influencing patients' health in my area. I will ask patients about their issues in a sensitive way and refer them to the appropriate resources and support. For example, if the patient is unable to buy food and medications, I can refer them to a social worker to help them access government and social support. If they have mental health and addiction issues, I can provide them with counselling resources. For instance, I could refer them to the Indigenous community centres and immigrant agencies based on their needs. For those who are suicidal, I can provide them with 211 Alberta- a helpline for community and social services and mental health addiction support.

<u>Providing Trauma-Informed Care:</u>

By being aware that many patients have experienced trauma due to factors including abuse, neglect or their cultural history, I will provide a safe place to discuss how this has affected their overall health. This interaction increases trust and enhances the therapeutic relationship.

Another way is by educating myself about Indigenous cultures and how intergenerational trauma has affected their mental, emotional and physical well-being. For instance, I could ask patients if they feel safe in the community, if there are any concerns about their children's safety, and if they have friends and family to support them. Doing this makes me humble and willing to understand the patient's values and needs. Also, being transparent with treatment alternatives and letting patients make their decisions means I am empowering them to be responsible for their health.

<u>Reducing Stigma:</u>

I recognize bias and discard stereotypes by avoiding derogatory language and discriminatory behaviour during patient interactions. I would also accept patients' choices to use alternative healing practices. Another way

to reduce stigma is to ask patients how they want to be addressed, respect treatment choices, and ensure equal allocation of health resources, such as medications, tests, and referrals.

<u>Advocating for Vulnerable Populations</u>:

I can do this by working with the RxA to advocate for more patients' access to health care and educating co-workers and my team about patients' cultural history. For the Indigenous peoples, becoming an ally means pharmacists standing up against injustice towards Indigenous peoples and challenging the stereotypes that have resulted in health inequalities. Hence, I can achieve this goal by working with Indigenous communities to address mental and addiction issues in the community and ways to promote Indigenous peoples' rights.

Another way of advocating is engaging with medical and social service organizations to improve patients' socio-determinants of health. I can write a letter to the Ministry of Human Services about a patient with mental health concerns who needs financial and health support so they can access assured income for the severely handicapped (AISH).

To fully integrate into primary and mental healthcare, patients must be involved in discussions about managing their physical and mental health conditions. Pharmacists must consciously work to reduce health inequalities among patients and complete referrals to the appropriate healthcare services as required. This collaboration would lead to an integrated care plan covering all aspects of the patient's needs.