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RATIONING HEALTH CARE RESPONSIBLY

CRAIG MITTON, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, HEALTH STUDIES, CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR in HEALTH CARE PRIORITY SETTING

Regardless of where you live and the public/private mix of financing, every health care system in the world rations health care

"We can't have it all, and we can't have it all today." There's no sugar coating the words of Craig Mitton, Canada Research Chair in Health Care Priority Setting. With the demand for health care services at ever-increasing levels, matched with a fixed pool of resources, rationing is necessary. "At the end of the day, tough decisions have to be made surrounding resource allocation," says Mitton.

As a health economist, Mitton's role is to develop evidence-based tools to assist decision-makers in getting the most out of available resources.

"We consider a variety of factors, from public involvement in health care decision making, to more technical aspects of decision making, like cost-benefit analysis," he says.

Having a process for priority setting that is both informed by and evaluated through research is central to ensuring organizations allocate resources in a manner which best meets health system objectives.

"Regardless of where you live and the public/private mix of financing, every health care system in the world rations health care. People often don't want

to hear that, but that's the bottom line, truth of the matter. My goal is to work within that constraint to see how we can best allocate resources in turn to assist the community in reaching its full potential."

A key challenge in Mitton's work is encouraging people to think outside of the box.

"Whether it is decision makers, students, clinicians, the public or health services researchers, everyone brings a lens to how they view health care," says Mitton. "Typically, health services researchers and clinicians are trained with the goal of improving clinical outcomes and population health. I also share this perspective, but I add the economic lens. If we only have so many resources in the pot, how are we going to allocate those?"

Priority setting and resource allocation decisions sit at the intersection of economics and ethics. As decision makers in every health organization world-wide are faced with the challenge of deciding what services to fund and what not to fund, Mitton's work has the potential to impact decision-making practice both in Canada and abroad.