

CMA Pre-budget Submission

Written submission for the pre-budget consultations in advance of the upcoming federal budget. By the Canadian Medical Association.



The Canadian Medical Association has been the national voice of Canada's medical profession since 1867.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

That the government create a one-time Health Care and Innovation Fund to resume health care services, bolster public health capacity and expand primary care teams, allowing Canadians wide-ranging access to health care.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That the government recognize and support the continued adoption of virtual care and address the inequitable access to digital health services by creating a Digi-Health Knowledge Bank and by expediting broadband access to all Canadians.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That the government act on our collective learned lessons regarding our approach to seniors care and create a national demographic top-up to the Canada Health Transfer and establish a Seniors Care Benefit.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the government recognize the unique risks and financial burden experienced by physicians and front line health care workers by implementing the Frontline Gratitude Tax Deduction, by extending eligibility of the Memorial Grant and by addressing remaining administrative barriers to physician practices accessing critical federal economic relief programs.

INTRODUCTION

Five months ago COVID-19 hit our shores. We were unprepared and unprotected. We were fallible and vulnerable. But, we responded swiftly.

- The federal government initiated Canadians into a new routine rooted in public health guidance.
 - It struggled to outfit the front line workers. It anchored quick measures to ensure some financial stability.
 - Canadians tuned in to daily updates on the health crisis and the battle against its wrath.
 - Together, we flattened the curve... **For now.**
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We have experienced the impact of the first wave of the pandemic. The initial wake has left Canadians, and those who care for them, feeling the insecurities in our health care system.

While the economy is opening in varied phases – an exhaustive list including patios, stores, office spaces, and schools – the health care system that struggled to care for those most impacted by the pandemic remains feeble, susceptible not only to the resurgence of the virus, but ill-prepared to equally defend the daily health needs of our citizens.

The window to maintain momentum and to accelerate solutions to existing systemic ailments that have challenged us for years is short. We cannot allow it to pass. **The urgency is written on the faces of tomorrow's patients.**

Before the onset of the pandemic, the government announced intentions to ensure all Canadians would be able to access a primary care family doctor. We knew then that the health care system was failing.

The pandemic has highlighted the criticality of these recommendations brought forward by the Canadian Medical Association. They bolster our collective efforts to ensure that Canadians get timely access to the care and services they need. Too many patients are succumbing to the gaps in our abilities to care for them. Patients have signaled their thirst for a model of virtual care. The magnitude of our failure to meet the needs of our aging population is now blindingly obvious. Many of the front line health care workers, the very individuals who put themselves and their families at risk to care for the nation, are being stretched to the breaking point to compensate for a crumbling system.

The health of the country's economy cannot exist without the health of Canadians.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Creating a one-time Health Care and Innovation Fund

Long wait times have strangled our nation's health care system for too long. It was chronic before COVID-19. Now, for far too many, it has turned tragic.

At the beginning of the pandemic, a significant proportion of health care services came to a halt. As health services are resuming, health care systems are left to grapple with a significant spike in wait times. Facilities will need to adopt new guidance to adhere to physical distancing, increasing staff levels, and planning and executing infrastructure changes. Canada's already financially atrophied health systems will face significant funding challenges at a time when provincial/territorial governments are concerned with resuscitating economies.

The CMA is strongly supportive of new federal funding to ensure Canada's health systems are resourced to meet the care needs of Canadians as the pandemic and life continues. **We need to invigorate our health care system's fitness to ensure that all Canadians are confident that it can and will serve them.**

Creating a new Health Care and Innovation Fund would focus on resuming the health care system, addressing the backlog, and bringing primary care, the backbone of our health care system, back to centre stage.

The CMA will provide the budget costing in follow-up as an addendum to this submission.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Embedding virtual care in our nation's health care system

It took a global pandemic to accelerate a digital economy and spark a digital health revolution in Canada. In our efforts to seek medical advice while in isolation, Canadians prompted a punctuated shift in how we can access care, regardless of our location or socio-economic situation. We redefined the need for virtual care.

During the pandemic, nearly half of Canadians have used virtual care. **An incredible 91% were satisfied with their experience.** The CMA has learned that 43% of Canadians would prefer that their first point of medical contact be virtual.

The CMA welcomes the \$240 million federal investment in virtual care and encourages the government to ensure it is linked to a model that ensures equitable access.

A gaping deficit remains in using virtual care. Recently the CMA, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the College of Family Physicians of Canada established a Virtual Care Task Force to identify digital opportunities to improve health care delivery, including what regulatory changes are required across provincial/territorial boundaries. To take full advantage of digital health capabilities, it will be essential for the entire population, to have a functional level of digital health literacy and access to the internet.

The continued adoption of virtual care is reliant on our ability to educate patients on how to access it. It will be further contingent on consistent and equitable access to broadband internet service.

Create a Digi-Health Knowledge Bank

Virtual care can't just happen. It requires knowledge on how to access and effectively deliver it, from patients and health care providers respectively. It is crucial to understand and promote digital health literacy across Canada. What the federal government has done for financial literacy, with the appointment of the Financial Literacy Leader within the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada, can serve as a template for digital health literacy.

We recommend that the federal government establish a Digi-Health Knowledge Bank to develop indicators and measure the digital health of Canadians, create tools patients and health care providers can use to enhance digital health literacy, continually monitor the changing digital divide that exists among some population segments.

Pan-Canadian broadband expansion

It is critical to bridge the broadband divide by ensuring all those in Canada have equitable access to affordable, reliable and sustainable internet connectivity. Those in rural, remote, Northern and Indigenous communities are presently seriously disadvantaged in this way. With the rise in virtual care, a lack of access to broadband exacerbates inequalities in access to care. This issue needs to be expedited before we can have pride in any other achievement.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensuring that better care is secured for our seniors

Some groups have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Woefully inadequate care of seniors and residents of long-term care homes has left a shameful and intensely painful mark on our record. Our health care system has failed to meet the needs of our aging population for too long.

The following two recommendations, combined with a focus on improving access to health care services, will make a critical difference for Canadian seniors.

A demographic top-up to the Canada Health Transfer

The Canada Health Transfer (CHT) is the single largest federal transfer to the provinces and territories. It is critical in supporting provincial and territorial health programs in Canada. As an equal per-capita-based transfer, it does not currently address the imbalance in population segments like seniors.

The CMA, hand-in-hand with the Organizations for Health Action (HEAL), recommends that a demographic top-up be transferred to provinces and territories based on the projected increase in health care spending associated with an aging population, with the federal contribution set to the current share of the CHT as a percentage of provincial-territorial health spending. A top-up has been calculated at 1.7 billion for 2021. Additional funding would be worth a total of \$21.1 billion to the provinces and territories over the next decade.

Seniors care benefit

Rising out-of-pocket expenses associated with seniors care could extend from 9 billion to 23 billion by 2035. A Seniors Care Benefits program would directly support seniors and those who care for them. Like the Child Care Benefit program, it would offset the high out-of-pocket health costs that burden caregivers and patients.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Cementing financial stabilization measures for our front line health care workers

The federal government has made great strides to mitigate the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Amidst the task of providing stability, there has been a grand oversight: measures to support our front line health care workers and their financial burden have fallen short.

The CMA recommends the following measures:

1. Despite the significant contribution of physicians' offices to Canada's GDP, many physician practices have not been eligible for critical economic programs. The CMA welcomes the remedies implemented by Bill C-20 and recommends the federal government address remaining administrative barriers to physicians accessing federal economic relief program.
2. We recommend that the government implement the Frontline Gratitude Tax Deduction, an income tax deduction for frontline health care workers put at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. In person patient care providers would be eligible to deduct a predetermined amount against income earned during the pandemic. The Canadian Armed Forces already employs this model for its members serving in hazardous missions.
3. It is a devastating reality that front line health care workers have died as a result of COVID-19. Extending eligibility for the Memorial Grant to families of front line health care workers who mourn the loss of a family member because of COVID-19, as a direct result of responding to the pandemic or as a result of an occupational illness or psychological impairment related to their work will relieve any unnecessary additional hardship experienced. The same grant should extend to cases in which their work contributes to the death of a family member.

CONCLUSION

Those impacted by COVID-19 deserve our care. The health of our nation's economy is contingent on the health standards for its people. We must assert the right to decent quality of life for those who are most vulnerable: those whose incomes have been dramatically impacted by the pandemic, those living in poverty, those living in marginalized communities, and those doubly plagued by experiencing racism and the pandemic. We are not speaking solely for physicians. This is about equitable care for every Canadian impacted by the pandemic.

Public awareness and support have never been stronger. We are not facing the end of the pandemic; we are confronting an ebb in our journey. Hope and optimism will remain elusive until we can be confident in our health care system.

