



Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Federal Budget Feb 19, 2021

Introduction

Protecting the health and well-being of all in Canada in the context of COVID-19 and Canada's economic recovery – Recommendations to support family physicians and patients in their care

The past year placed significantly increased demands on Canada's health care system as it responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Family physicians, as the backbone of the health care system, continue to work on the front lines in community clinics, hospitals and long-term care homes.

The experiences of the past year yielded many crucial lessons that should be used to inform future development of the health care system. Investment into a stronger, more equitable health care system that can better meet the needs of all in Canada is key to a robust economic recovery.

Federal Budget 2021 Recommendations Summary

1. Strengthen community-based care through a dedicated **Primary Health Care Transition Fund**.
2. Restore investments in public health to ensure future emergency preparedness.
3. Support community practices as they adjust to provide care during COVID-19.
 - a. Invest into equitable provision of virtual care across Canada.
 - b. Ensure availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) and address financial strain of providing quality care during the pandemic.
 - c. Support vaccination through clear information, robust funding, and necessary supplies.
4. Fully implement universal national pharmacare.
5. Invest in additional mental health funding, focusing on support for front line health workers.
6. Adopt additional measures to reinforce equity:
 - a. Eliminate boil water advisories in Indigenous communities within 3 years.
 - b. Provide broadband access to internet to rural communities across Canada.
 - c. Dedicate funding to address disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on racialized communities.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Strengthen community-based care through a dedicated Primary Health Care Transition Fund.

Primary care is a foundation of an effective health care system. The characteristics that make primary care truly effective in maintaining a healthy population are integration with other health care settings and community services, collaborative care and a focus on the needs of patients. This approach, formalized by the CFPC in its vision of the [Patient's Medical Home \(PMH\)](#), has a broad coalition of support and has informed development of primary care in several provinces, including Family Health Teams in Ontario, Groupes de médecine de famille in Quebec, and Primary Care Networks in Alberta.

The high-functioning practices aligned with the PMH vision have been shown to reduce use of emergency rooms, drive down long-term system costs, improve management of chronic disease and screening rates, as well as enhance continuity of care and satisfaction of patients and providers.

Since 2019, leaders from the Canadian Association of Social Workers, the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Nurses Association and the College of Family Physicians of Canada have jointly advocated for a \$1.2 billion [Primary Health Care Transition Fund](#) that would support the establishment of sustainable medical home models across the country. Investment in a Primary Health Care Transition Fund will result in improved health outcomes through equitable and timely access to services, which will decrease costs to the health system in the future. Data from Alberta demonstrated that two clinics aligned with the principles of the Patient's Medical Home saved the system over \$120 million over 10 years through reduced dependency on hospital services.

Investment into strengthening primary care, supported by specific and measurable goals, would ensure a more equitable and efficient provision of care with improved continuity of care. It can also decrease the number of people in Canada without a dedicated primary care provider.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Restore investments in public health to ensure future emergency preparedness.

Public health has experienced persistent funding cuts over the years. The pandemic has underscored the crucial importance of stable, ongoing public health funding to build capacity for future emergencies.

It is crucial that a robust review of lessons learned throughout the COVID-19 response is used in conjunction with increased targeted public health spending to strengthen public health systems across Canada for future challenges.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Support community practices as they adjust to provide care during COVID-19.

Family physicians form the backbone of Canada's primary care system and continue to provide crucial care to patients across various settings, including on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19 in hospitals and long-term care homes. To reduce the need for in-person visits and increase accessibility of care, there has been a rapid shift to the provision of virtual care. However, virtual care policies are variable. Some vital services like asynchronous messaging, which allow patients to communicate non-immediate needs, are only covered through for-profit services. Such services, also featuring virtual equivalent of walk-in clinics, promote episodic access to care, threatening the continuity of patient-provider relationships and in some cases, undermining principles of the *Canada Health Act*.

The federal government's initial \$240 million investment into virtual care is laudable, but additional resources are required to:

- Standardize virtual care policies across provinces,
- Expand virtual care coverage to include asynchronous communication with patients,
- Ensure offering virtual care does not financially disadvantage providers.

Community practices across the country took a variety of measures to ensure the safety of their staff and patients. In a CFPC survey over 90% of family physicians reported adjusting the physical space of their practices, increasing use of PPE and/or sanitizing practices. These adjustments come with a significant increase in expenditures and must be recognized and supported through dedicated government funding.

The unfolding vaccination campaign will be a crucial long-term solution in the fight against COVID-19. Due to their strong community connections and vaccination experience, family practices must be key contributors to the vaccination effort. In order to maximize the effectiveness of their contribution, family practices must be supported financially to ensure capacity. They must also be provided with clear guidance and necessary materials to address vaccine hesitancy and ensure timely vaccination of their patients.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Fully implement universal national pharmacare.

The pandemic put a strain on the finances of many in Canada, and particularly highlighted the fact that for many people, affording necessary medication remains a challenge. Canada is the only country with a universal health care system that does not feature universal coverage of prescription medication. The government's work to ensure this key program is in place should be expedited, as presented in [Bill C-213](#). Sufficient funding for full implementation of universal national pharmacare must be in place to ensure the success of this important program.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Invest into additional mental health funding focused on support for front line health workers.

The mental health burden has been considerable throughout the pandemic and efforts to expand the availability of mental health resources both to providers and patients should continue. Prolonged lockdowns have affected the mental health and well-being of Canada's population with further harm likely as quarantine measures persist. The federal government's Wellness Together program is a strong first step in addressing this issue and its capacity should be expanded. Investments into widespread availability of psychotherapy and other mental health services are necessary to contribute to a resilient recovery of both Canada's economy and the well-being of its people.

Front line health care workers have been subject to excessive stress and significant burnout during the pandemic and additional capacity of mental health supports should be made available to them.

RECOMMENDATION 6. Additional measures to reinforce equity including support for Indigenous, rural and racialized communities.

Despite the government's 2015 commitment to end boil-water advisories within 5 years, many Indigenous communities still live under these advisories. It is unethical and immoral to leave

communities without potable water, especially when this has been an enduring health hazard for over 25 years in some cases. A commitment to address remaining advisories within 3 years is necessary and should be supported through adequate funding. The federal government must also invest in empowering Indigenous leadership, engaging leaders to ensure improved health outcomes. The steps the government has taken to acknowledge and address systemic discrimination are valued and must be developed into robust programs with measurable outcomes.

Virtual care can significantly improve accessibility of care for people living in rural and remote settings. However, to fully take advantage of this new technology and the rapid pivot of the health care system to enable virtual care, high quality internet must be made available throughout all regions of Canada. The government must assign targeted robust funding to ensure widespread broadband internet accessibility across Canada, particularly in rural and remote areas.

It has been well-documented that racialized communities face disproportionately significant challenges during the pandemic and dedicated funding is required to support these communities in their ability to cope with the consequences of COVID as well as to build up the preventative capacity for the future.

About the CFPC

The voice of family medicine in Canada

The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) is the professional organization that represents more than 40,000 members across the country. The College establishes the standards for and accredits postgraduate family medicine training in Canada's 17 medical schools. It reviews and certifies continuing professional development programs and materials that enable family physicians to meet certification and licensing requirements.

The CFPC provides high-quality services, supports family medicine teaching and research, and advocates on behalf of the specialty of family medicine, family physicians, and the patients they serve.

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