

# Meeting the health care needs of Canadians



ASSOCIATION  
MÉDICALE  
CANADIENNE



CANADIAN  
MEDICAL  
ASSOCIATION

1 2 Canadian Healthcare Association  
9 0 Association canadienne des soins de santé  
3 0  
1 6 75 years of service / 75 années de service



The Health Action Lobby  
**HEAL**  
Le Groupe d'intervention action santé

 **CANADIAN NURSES ASSOCIATION**  
ASSOCIATION DES INFIRMIÈRES ET INFIRMIERS DU CANADA



**CANADIAN  
PHARMACISTS  
ASSOCIATION**

**ASSOCIATION DES  
PHARMACIENS  
DU CANADA**

On 23 January 2006, Canadians will elect a new government. For many voters, health care will play a pivotal role in determining their choice. To encourage a meaningful patient-centred discussion and debate on health care during this federal election, our five national organizations have come together to present a joint vision.

As non-partisan organizations, our role is to inform and educate. With this statement, we aim to focus the health care debate and give Canadians the information they need to make an informed decision.

## Access

Ensuring that Canadians have timely access to needed services is the primary objective of Canada's health care system. Failure to meet this objective has a direct impact on patients who suffer negative health consequences and experience diminished quality of life as a result.

Meaningful reduction in wait times will only occur if we take immediate action to address the key access barriers, such as shortages in health care personnel, system capacity and information technology. To reduce pressure on the system, we must also focus on preventing illness, managing chronic diseases and establishing guidelines for appropriateness of care.

To improve access to health care services we need:

- pan-Canadian performance goals or meaningful benchmarks based on the best available medical evidence and expertise
- measurement and monitoring of wait times to track efforts to reduce wait times in priority areas and across the continuum of health care services
- collaborative work among health professionals to develop, improve and implement wait-time benchmarks
- measures to ensure access to care when maximum wait times are exceeded.

Over time, governments need to expand their focus on improving access to include the full health care spectrum. Such an approach will ensure that reducing wait times in one area is not achieved at the expense of another area.

## People

A key impediment to timely access is the shortage of health care professionals — the people who provide the care. Whether it is physicians, nurses, pharmacists or other health care professionals, shortages persist in every provider group at every level of the system.

Pan-Canadian planning for human resources in the health care sector is essential to ensure that health, labour, immigration and education policies do

not undermine efforts to recruit, train and retain health care professionals. Coordinated planning would also ensure that new knowledge is used to improve the delivery of health care services. Education programs and employment policies must be revitalized to encourage effective collaboration among health care professions responding to the needs of individual Canadians.

To improve patients' access to health care providers we need to:

- increase enrolment in Canadian health science education programs, including postgraduate training positions
- launch a pan-Canadian initiative to recruit, retain and repatriate health care professionals along with a sustained effort to promote careers in health sciences
- invest in supporting the integration of qualified internationally educated professionals into the Canadian health care system
- establish a pan-Canadian coordinating office to improve planning, collaboration, coordination and research in the field of health human resources.

The promise of access requires the right people working with the right tools. All other investments are irrelevant if we do not have qualified people available to provide care and treatment to patients.

## **Continuum**

The continuum of care includes health and health care services viewed as outside the traditional publicly insured system. These services include public health, home care, long-term care, pharmacare and mental health services.

To lessen the pressure on the acute care system and to meet the health needs of Canadians, now and in the future, public coverage must be expanded incrementally to include these services.

To strengthen Canada's continuum of care we need to:

- focus on a broad range of home care services and other measures to reduce the demands on hospitals
- further enhance and sustain public health programs across Canada with specific attention to populations at risk, such as aboriginal people and children
- extend drug coverage to ensure equitable access to pharmaceutical products without undue financial burden and promote optimal drug use
- move mental health services under the umbrella of publicly insured services
- ensure that targets are developed to support pan-Canadian health goals in tandem with an implementation plan.

Expanding the continuum of care will lessen some of the burden on the acute care system, improve equity and fairness and enhance the health of Canadians.

## **Resources and accountability**

The 2004 *10-Year Plan to Strengthen Health Care* added substantial federal dollars to the Canada health transfer base at a level commensurate with the \$3 billion a year that we had recommended to first ministers when they began their negotiations leading to the agreement. As well, the plan contained a 6% explicit annual escalator that responds to our long-standing request for federal funding to be predictable and long term to keep pace with economic growth and health system renewal requirements. The Wait Times Reduction Fund linked to the establishment of pan-Canadian access targets and benchmarks also represented a positive move forward.

Even though progress is occurring across the country in various ways, there is still unfinished business and unmet needs. We require additional resources for:

- a pan-Canadian health human resources strategy that will address the critical shortage of health care professionals
- enhanced support for both inter- and intra-professional collaboration
- capacity enhancement measures within the acute care system and improved health care infrastructure including health information technology and diagnostic equipment
- expansion of the continuum of care in areas including public health, home care, long-term care, pharmacare and mental health.

The most important step is to ensure accountability and transparency in the use of increased dollars and to make measurable progress. Federal investments must be linked to provincial and territorial initiatives targeting pan-Canadian objectives to broaden the care continuum and reduce wait times.

## **Conclusion**

Only a clear vision and strong leadership will restore the confidence of Canadians in their health care system. We have put forth a comprehensive patient-centred vision for health care. We encourage all political parties to do the same. Canadians deserve to have the information they need to make an informed decision in this federal election.