

Submission prepared by the CMA – Quebec office

# Senior care and prevention – For a healthier Quebec

Pre-budget submission for the  
2020–2021 Quebec government  
budget

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## Introduction

Founded in Quebec City in 1867, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) unites members of the medical profession in Canada to improve population health and strengthen the various health care systems. On behalf of the medical profession and patients, the CMA stands for professionalism, integrity and compassion. The CMA and its Quebec office complement and collaborate with Quebec's existing medical bodies.

### The Quebec health care system

The CMA has always taken an interest in and a stand on various health issues affecting the medical profession and patients. Access to health care is one such issue.

The CMA recently commissioned Ipsos to conduct an extensive survey on the population's concerns regarding access to health care. The data indicates that Quebecers are the most pessimistic in the country—and this sentiment is even more pronounced when respondents think about the future. Forty percent of survey respondents are concerned about access to health care, and more than half (55%) have a negative perception of the future of the health care system, compared with 26% and 47%, respectively, for the rest of Canada.<sup>1</sup> It also appears that Quebecers are significantly affected by the shortage of health professionals and the increase in system costs due to the aging population and the growing number of seniors with health care needs.

The public's worries are also shared by our members and physicians in Quebec, who are concerned by the fact that their patients are not receiving the care and services they need in a timely manner.

The government of Quebec is making a significant investment in the health care network, a budget item that accounts for almost 50% of total program expenditures.<sup>2</sup> The CMA applauds this effort.

The CMA submission proposes certain measures that have a two-fold objective: improving the health of Quebecers and ensuring the sustainability of the health care system for future generations.

The CMA submission is divided into three parts: improving support to elderly patients and caregivers; tobacco and vaping control; and reducing unnecessary examinations and treatments to optimize use of the health care system's financial and human resources.

## Seniors and caregivers

It is no secret that Quebec's population is aging rapidly. According to data from the Institut de la statistique du Québec cited in the *Plan stratégique du ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux*, seniors are expected to make up 25% of the population in 2031 and 28% in 2066, compared with 18% in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Although aging is not necessarily synonymous with poor health or disability, the likelihood of both of these conditions increases with age. Close to seven out of ten Quebecers aged 65 and over report two or more long-term health conditions, and 93% of these individuals take medication.<sup>4</sup> The most common health issues among people aged 65 and over are arthritis and hypertension.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the incidence of cancer rises significantly with age.<sup>6</sup>

The aging population thus exerts additional pressure on a health care system that is already stretched thin. The CMA has long been lobbying the federal government to increase the Canada Health Transfer to take into account the needs of the aging population when calculating the Transfer. Consequently, the CMA supports the Quebec government's negotiations with the federal government to secure an increase in federal health transfer payments.

To ensure a sustainable health care system, it is important to invest in measures that will allow the public to maintain their health as they age, and that foster seniors' independence—such as a healthy lifestyle, adequate nutrition and treatment adherence, where applicable. The Quebec government has already taken steps to foster the well-being of elderly persons, such as implementing the senior assistance tax credit and increasing support for home support services. The Minister Responsible for Seniors and Informal Caregivers has announced the development of a provincial policy for caregivers in 2020–2021, as indicated in the recently submitted strategic plan.<sup>3</sup>

These initiatives aimed at improving the lives of seniors and caregivers are to be commended. The CMA believes that the scope of these initiatives should be widened.

## Support for seniors

In its economic update presented on December 3, 2018, the Quebec government announced a new tax credit for seniors over age 70. More specifically, this tax credit provides annual assistance of up to \$200 per senior and \$400 per couple.

The CMA welcomes this initiative, but it should be noted that seniors aged 65 and over spend more than \$2,200 on health care fees each year<sup>7</sup> (health care items, medication, dental care, insurance premiums, etc.). Given that this level of spending is significant and that 60% of seniors have an annual income under \$30,000,<sup>8</sup> this tax credit appears to be insufficient for those who have to bear these additional daily health expenses. We must collectively

ensure that certain seniors will not have to forego treatment because they cannot afford it.

Quebecers' health care expenses have been increasing in recent years,<sup>9</sup> and the CMA believes it is essential that this growing problem be dealt with right now. The CMA recommends that the Quebec government create an allowance for seniors aged 65 and over. This new allowance, which would be modelled after the family allowance, would provide financial assistance to low- and medium-income seniors to help them manage additional health-related expenses.

The CMA also believes that the senior assistance tax credit should be extended to people ages 65 to 69.

### Family caregivers

Like seniors' advocacy groups, the CMA recommends greater recognition of family caregivers' contribution to the Quebec health care system. This could take the form of a greater tax credit for caregivers offered in Quebec.

Family caregivers are an integral part of the health care system, as they play an active role in enabling seniors to stay at home—which is what most seniors prefer.<sup>10</sup>

The Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux plans to increase home support services as part of its 2019–2023 strategic plan.<sup>10</sup> The CMA believes that this initiative should be combined with increased assistance for family caregivers.

In 2016, the demographic portrait of caregivers in Quebec indicated that 35% of Quebecers, or 2.2 million people, provided care to a senior. Of these, around 15% acted as caregivers for more than 10 hours a week. With the aging of the population set to accelerate in the coming years and decades, caregivers' unpaid working hours will increase significantly. In Canada, according to a 2011 study, close to 80% of all assistance to recipients of long-term care was provided by family caregivers. This represents a contribution of over five billion dollars' worth of unpaid services for the public health network.<sup>11</sup>

According to the CMA, the tax credit for caregivers is an indispensable and necessary financial contribution for these people and the seniors receiving care, but this measure in no way reflects the costs assumed by caregivers. More support should be provided to people who give their time every day, sustain financial losses and compensate for the lack of resources in the health care system.

Given the indispensable role family caregivers play, the CMA recommends that the government increase the tax credit for caregivers so that it better reflects their contribution to society—and this should apply to all four types of family caregivers defined by Revenu Québec.<sup>12</sup>

- Caregivers who take care of a senior spouse who is unable to live alone
- Caregivers who house an eligible relative
- Caregivers who cohabit with an eligible relative who is unable to live alone
- Caregivers who support an eligible relative whom they regularly and continuously assist in carrying out basic activities of daily living

## CMA recommendations

The CMA recommends:

1. Expanding the senior assistance tax credit to support people who are between the ages of 65 and 69
2. Creating a seniors' allowance to provide financial assistance to low- and medium-income seniors to help them manage additional health-related expenses
3. Increasing the tax credit for caregivers, for all types of family caregivers recognized by Revenu Québec

## Smoking and vaping prevention

Although the government of Quebec must pay specific attention to seniors' care to lighten the burden on the health care system, prevention is still just as important. Prevention has proven to be useful in reducing health care costs by eliminating the need for certain treatments and hospitalizations.<sup>13</sup> Measures to control smoking and vaping fall under this category.

For decades, the CMA has been promoting the benefits of a smoke-free society with the support of our physician members, who are witnesses to tobacco's harmful effects on health. The CMA issued its first public health warning on the risks associated with tobacco use in 1954, and since then has made a significant contribution to the development of public policies related to the industry. One needs only to think of the role that the CMA played in the federal government's decision to require that tobacco products be sold in plain packaging and standard sizes.

Every government in the country has been actively committed to the fight against tobacco for years, and there has been a significant drop in tobacco use over time. However, regular tobacco use in Quebec has settled at around 15% of the population aged 12 or older.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this proportion is still too high.

There is another growing phenomenon among young people that we believe merits the attention of the Minister of Finance: e-cigarettes, also referred to as vaping devices. According to the *Enquête québécoise sur la santé des jeunes du secondaire 2016-2017* [Quebec health survey of high school students 2016-2017], one third of youths have used e-cigarettes.<sup>15</sup> Although these types of products do not contain tobacco, they do contain nicotine and aromatic substances that could be harmful to people's health. The CMA recommends increasing research on the potential health consequences these devices can have on people, and the validity of claims that they are an effective means to quit smoking. We also support prohibiting e-cigarette sales to minors, enforcing strict regulation of the sale of these products and prohibiting vaping in locations where smoking is currently forbidden. We also recommend that the marketing restrictions on tobacco products be applied to vaping products and devices as well.

The CMA also believes that governments would be well advised to draw inspiration from strategies that have been successful in curbing tobacco use and reducing the appeal of e-cigarettes, particularly among young people. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a 10% increase in the price of tobacco results in a 4% to 8% drop in consumption. Taxes on vaping products could therefore have the same deterrent effect, especially among young people, who are more sensitive to price variations.<sup>16</sup> This is why it is imperative that we do not wait for the outcome of the work carried out by the special vaping intervention group led by the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) before taking action.

#### CMA recommendation

Effective January 1, 2020, the government of British Columbia raised the sales tax on vaping products from 7% to 20%<sup>17</sup> to prevent and reduce the use of these products by young people. The CMA recommends that the government of Quebec emulate this policy by increasing taxes on vaping and tobacco products.

#### The right care at the right time

According to data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), up to 30% of tests, treatments and procedures in Canada are potentially unnecessary. Unnecessary tests, treatments, and procedures not only add zero value to care, but they may also expose patients to additional risks and waste health resources.<sup>18</sup>

In 2012, as certain treatments were being overused or not adding value for patients, the CMA was a leading partner in the *Choosing Wisely Canada* campaign, which was launched in Quebec in 2014. This program helps health care professionals and patients engage in a dialogue about unnecessary tests and treatments and helps them make smart and effective choices to ensure quality health care. Guides and recommendations for patients and health

care professionals have been developed through this campaign to make them aware of overuse and overdiagnosis.

The ultimate goal of *Choosing Wisely* is to improve the performance of the health care system.

A survey indicates that almost half of physicians (48%) agree that they need more support and tools to help them determine which services are not suitable for their patients.<sup>19</sup> The tools provided by the *Choosing Wisely* campaign have proven effective. The CMA believes that their use by Quebec physicians and patients is beneficial.

Publicizing campaigns and developing and updating tools and recommendations require significant financial resources. Elsewhere in the country, several provinces are providing financial support to *Choosing Wisely*. However, Quebec ended its financial commitment in the past year.

### CMA recommendation

Given the Quebec government's commitment regarding the appropriateness of care, the CMA recommends supporting the *Choosing Wisely Quebec* campaign with a long-term financial commitment.

## Summary of CMA recommendations

### *Senior and caregiver support*

The CMA is proposing three main recommendations to support seniors and their caregivers. The recommended measures are aimed at ensuring healthy aging and recognizing family caregivers' economic and social contribution in Quebec.

1. Expand the senior assistance tax credit to support people who are between the ages of 65 and 69.
2. Create an allowance for seniors to help them manage private health care costs.
3. Increase the tax credit for caregivers, for all types of caregivers recognized by Revenu Québec.

### *Implementation of a tax on tobacco and vaping products*

The government of British Columbia announced its intent to increase the sales tax on vaping products from 7% to 20%, effective January 1, 2020,<sup>20</sup> to prevent and reduce the use of these products by young people. The CMA recommends that the government of Quebec emulate this policy by heavily taxing vaping and tobacco products.

## Contribution to the Choosing Wisely Canada program

Given the Quebec government's commitment regarding the appropriateness of care, the CMA recommends supporting the *Choosing Wisely Quebec* campaign with a long-term financial commitment.

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- <sup>7</sup> Institut de la statistique du Québec. *Dépenses moyennes des ménages déclarants, selon le groupe d'âge de la personne de référence, Québec, 2006* (French only). Quebec: Institut de la statistique du Québec; 2006. Available: [http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/conditions-vie-societe/depenses-avoirs-dettes/depenses/depdeclar\\_age.htm](http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/conditions-vie-societe/depenses-avoirs-dettes/depenses/depdeclar_age.htm) (accessed 2020 Jan 13).
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<sup>16</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). *Tobacco Free Initiative*: <https://www.who.int/tobacco/economics/taxation/en/>

<sup>17</sup> Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, *Bill 45 – 2019: Taxation Statutes Amendment Act*. Geneva: WHO; 2019. Available: <https://www.leg.bc.ca/parliamentary-business/legislation-debates-proceedings/41st-parliament/4th-session/bills/first-reading/gov45-1> (accessed 2020 Jan 13).

<sup>18</sup> Choosing Wisely Canada. *Implementing Choosing Wisely Canada Recommendations*. Toronto: Choosing Wisely Canada; 2020. Available: <https://choosingwiselycanada.org/implementation/> (accessed 2020 Jan 13).

<sup>19</sup> Canadian Medical Association, *e-Panel Survey Summary: Choosing Wisely Canada* (distributed to 3,864 e-Panel members and completed in November 2016): <https://www.cma.ca/e-panel-survey-summary-choosing-wisely-canada>.

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