

Appearance before the House
of Commons Standing
Committee on Health

Study on the Emergency
Situation Facing Canadians in
Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's my honour to appear before you today. My name is Dr. Ann Collins. I am a retired family physician. I've taught family medicine. I've run a full-time practice. I have served with the Canadian Armed Forces. And I have worked in nursing home care. Just yesterday I was called back into service to administer much-needed vaccines to people in my community. Mr. Chair, I am honoured to appear before you at this time in the pandemic, representing the physicians of Canada and the people they care for.

I am joined today by my colleague, Dr. Abdo Shabah, CMA Board member and emergency physician serving on the frontline during the pandemic in Quebec.

As President of the Canadian Medical Association, I am gravely concerned with the state of the pandemic in Canada today, in particular in hot spot regions where we are facing extreme circumstances. I applaud the federal government for its unrelenting leadership and unprecedented action in leading our national response.

The pandemic has been unrelenting in challenging the physicians and health providers on the front lines. And, the third wave is hitting hard. The CMA is deeply concerned about the toll COVID-19 has taken on the people who will steer us out of this health crisis. Emergency doctors are working twelve hour shifts and being required to work another four hours. Day after day. Fatigue and anxiety are high, threatening burnout. And yet, there is no relief in sight.

Medical professionals are being trained on critical care triage protocols, which may be enacted to respond to the lack of resources. If enacted, physicians will be in the untenable position of making the difficult life and death decisions about who gets care and when.

The moment we have dreaded and feared – when the pandemic's grip is surpassing resource capacities in some regions – is here.

The CMA implores provinces and territories to continue to act in the spirit of collaboration to ensure that our resources are deployed where they are needed. We must work together for the common good to prevent loss of life wherever possible. Some areas of risk have already benefited from the aid of resources shared by the premiers – most importantly today is critical care staff. To call these actions laudable is an understatement. The CMA commends the federal government for its leadership in encouraging and facilitating this deployment of national resources.

Canada's recovery is contingent on the recovery of our health systems. We vigorously applaud the recent commitment of \$4 billion to resolve the backlogs of the first and second waves. I cannot stress too profoundly the incredible urgency for Parliament to pass Bill C-25 without delay.

Still more is needed. Today, 5 million Canadians do not have access to a family doctor or a family care team. That's 13 percent of the country. If our health care systems are a house, primary care is the front door. The drafts are increasing. There's no security when the front

door is off its hinges. Primary care is affordable. It fosters equity. And it will be the cornerstone of health care, supporting the people in Canada through and out of the pandemic.

Expanding primary care will help ensure every single Canadian has access to a family doctor. The right to access health care must not be subject to our status or postal code. Every marginalized and susceptible person in Canada deserves the attention of a primary care team. Our nation has never been in more dire need of health security. The CMA appeals to Parliament to deliver this critical health care resource. There's still time.

The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses, shortages and lack of capacity of Canada's public health care systems. We must begin to chart the course in re-imagining public health and health care. The long-term mental health impact of COVID-19 on front line health care workers is coming. We must prepare for it. All of this will require a commitment to increased and sustained funding from the federal government. The CMA welcomes the Prime Minister's pledge to engage the provinces and territories in a continued and collaborative plan to address the future of our health systems.

The financial commitments the federal government has made to support Canada's pandemic response are exemplary. Investments to date will improve lives. They will save lives. But there are still some missing steps that lie before us. Completing them will allow all Canadians an equitable opportunity at health security. Completing them will sustain our frontline health care workers in the fight they face today and the care they must provide in the future.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, let me thank the committee for the invitation to share the convictions of Canada's physicians. The CMA and its 80,000 physician members will be there to fully support the government in addressing the stability of Canada's health systems.