Canadian Physiotherapy Association



WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE'S PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATION

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the Canada Student Financial Assistance (CSFA) Program to Include Physiotherapists
- Enable Physiotherapists to Work to Their Full Scope of Practice
- Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services in Primary Care Teams
- 4 Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services for Older Adults
- Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services for Canadians Experiencing Chronic Pain

INTRODUCTION

Solving Canada's Healthcare Crisis

Over the past year, Canada has seen the cumulative effects of decades of underinvestment in healthcare appear in the form of hospital emergency room closures, lack of access to family physicians, long wait times, and quality of care that has not been sustained at the level Canadians expect.

In February 2023, Provinces, Territories, and the Government of Canada came to a historic funding agreement that will see increased investments in the Canada Health Transfer. However, in addition to these new investments, the ability to reinforce our healthcare system and address the needs of an aging population will also require innovative models of care that leverage the skills and expertise of all regulated health professionals, including physiotherapists.

Physiotherapy is an essential service required to address the healthcare needs of the population. Physiotherapists provide evidence-based, reliable, and effective care, and can help to address the critical challenges the healthcare system is facing, including health and human resource shortages, support for older Canadians aging in place, and excessive opioid use among persons living with chronic pain.

As physiotherapy is embedded into the Canada Health Act, physiotherapists are already well-positioned to address barriers to care and to improve system capacity. The recommendations in this submission reflect the opportunity to draw on the existing skills and expertise of Canada's physiotherapy professionals and expand on innovative and proven models of care to help strengthen our universal public healthcare system and ensure that all Canadians can get the care they need no matter where they live.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Expand the Canada Student Financial Assistance (CSFA) Program to Include Physiotherapists

Canada needs more healthcare workers. Physiotherapy is facing the same acute crisis in health human resources as other healthcare professions, and these national shortages are being felt in communities across the country, particularly those that are rural or remote.

The physiotherapy profession welcomed the announcement of the expansion of the Canada Student Financial Assistance program to help more physicians and nurses work in underserved and remote communities, but was disappointed to see that physiotherapists were not included in this expansion.

Physiotherapy graduates should be the natural choice for the program expansion in 2024.

Expanding the Student Financial Assistant program to include physiotherapy would require minimal investment but would offer numerous benefits, including attracting more Canadians to the physiotherapy profession, increasing health service access and delivery in rural and remote communities, and supporting the recruitment of students from underrepresented communities.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Enable Physiotherapy Professionals to Work to Their Full Scope of Practice

This year, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities noted the need for better coordination across provinces when it comes to regulation and licensing of healthcare professionals, recommending that "the Government of Canada work with the provinces and territories to remove barriers to labour mobility in the healthcare sector, including through the interprovincial/territorial coordination of regulation and licensing requirements."

Building on the new healthcare funding agreement, the Government of Canada must prioritize working with the Provinces to align the scope of practice of regulated healthcare professionals across the country. Physiotherapists already have a broad scope of practice recognized under regulation, but they are not consistently utilized from province to province. In many provinces, physiotherapists have the capacity to support a much broader range of healthcare solutions and patients than they are currently enabled to.

Several provinces have already begun the work of tearing down existing barriers to practice to full scope. For example, both Ontario and Nova Scotia have recently passed health legislation expanding the scope of practice for several healthcare professions. Physiotherapists see this as a move in a positive direction, but there is still much more that can be done.

The existing discrepancies in the scope of practice for physiotherapists are based on historical precedent, not in research evidence. For example, in Alberta, Nova Scotia, and Quebec, there have been proven benefits to physiotherapists being able to order diagnostic imaging such as x-rays and ultrasounds; however, physiotherapists are not able to order diagnostic imaging in all provinces. And in Alberta and Quebec, physiotherapists have proven to play a key role on emergency room teams, but the use of physiotherapists in emergency rooms is not standard across all provinces and territories.

Allowing physiotherapists to practice to their full scope would immediately improve patient outcomes, reduce pressure on other healthcare providers, and optimize system capacity. For example, when Canadians with musculoskeletal conditions can directly access a physiotherapist without a referral, outcomes show reductions in pain, improved function and quality of life, reduced use of other health system resources, and lower healthcare costs.[i],[ii]

Additionally, standardizing both licensing and scope of practice nationally would increase the inter-provincial mobility of physiotherapists, improve access to care, provide more resiliency and flexibility in the healthcare system, reduce healthcare costs, and enhance quality of care.

Immediate benefits to the system could be realized with standardized scope of practice for the following physiotherapy services:

- Diagnostic imaging (ultrasound, MRI, x-ray)
- Laboratory tests (blood work)
- Specialist referrals
- Prescribing mobility aids, walkers, wheelchairs, canes, braces, and adapted transportation
- Limited swabbing (e.g., nasopharyngeal)
- Manipulation
- Orthotics
- · Pelvic health

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services in Primary Care Teams

In Canada, there are approximately 6 million adults currently without a family physician.[iii] Further integrating physiotherapists into team-based models of care can help address this gap, while also removing some of the burdens currently placed on primary care physicians and reducing surgical and specialist referral rates.

In team-based primary care settings, physiotherapists apply their expertise to treat diverse patient populations experiencing multi-system, musculoskeletal, cardiorespiratory, neurological, and pain-related conditions. The benefit of integrating physiotherapy into team-based models of care includes health promotion, illness prevention, and patient self-management for multiple disease conditions.[iv],[iii],[iv]

Over recent years, Ontario has made major strides in integrating physiotherapists into primary care settings, which has led to significant improvements in access to primary care, pain management, physician satisfaction, and overall system efficiencies. Similarly, British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta have also further integrated physiotherapists into primary care teams with strong results. However, there is still much opportunity to further increase physiotherapy presence in primary care across Canada.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services for Older Adults

Over the next twenty years, the number of Canadians aged sixty-five and older is expected to grow by sixty-eight percent, to 10.4 million.[vii] Equitable and early access to physiotherapy will be essential to both supporting the independence and mobility of this growing population of older adults and preventing potential declines amongst this group.

For example, evidence from health administrative data indicates that homecare rehabilitation therapy is associated with reduced hospital readmissions and reduced emergency department use over the three months after acute care hospital stays for people with chronic health conditions, when compared with people receiving other homecare services.[viii]

Physiotherapists already play a key role in supporting older adults and ensuring that they can continue to live well in the community. Physiotherapists offer services in a variety of formats and locations (e.g., in-person, group, telerehabilitation, virtual, self-management strategies, fall prevention, ambulation assistance, etc.) to suit the needs of patients, and also support patients by sharing strategies with their care partners.[ix],[x]

Expanding early access to community-based physiotherapy services and embedding physiotherapists into interprofessional teams will ensure that more older adults are able to age in place, further supporting their independence and providing them with more opportunities for social participation.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Expand Access to Physiotherapy Services for Canadians Experiencing Chronic Pain

Canada is currently battling both a chronic pain epidemic and an opioid addiction crisis. Nearly 8 million Canadians live with chronic pain, many of whom are managing this pain with opioids, which has led to increased rates of opioid addiction. While the misuse of opioids is a complex problem that will require a multi-pronged approach to solve, one of the most promising solutions is to prevent opioid addiction before it starts by providing early access to non-pharmacological pain management.

Physiotherapy professionals are experts in non-pharmacological chronic pain management and rehabilitation. Physiotherapists support patients by providing efficient pain self-management strategies that improve function and increase patient quality of life in the face of chronic pain. As such, providing early access to physiotherapy as a solution to pain management can mitigate opioid use amongst persons with chronic pain.

Earlier this year, the Canadian Physiotherapy Association released a position paper calling for universal access and funding for non-pharmacological solutions to pain. The full paper and list of recommendations to government can be found here.[xi]

CONCLUSION

Physiotherapists are regulated non-pharmacological pain management and rehabilitation experts with the knowledge, competencies, and skills required to address some of the greatest challenges in Canada's healthcare system.[xii]

As the Government of Canada tables innovative solutions to address our country's most pressing health system concerns, physiotherapy must be part of the discussion and the solution.

About the Canadian Physiotherapy Association

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association represents physiotherapy professionals, including registered physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants, physiotherapy technologists and students across Canada. Physiotherapy professionals provide essential expertise, rehabilitative care, and treatment, enabling Canadians to live well and actively participate in all facets of their lives.

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CITATIONS

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