

Canada's leaders must prioritize crumbling health infrastructure

Laying a strong foundation for a pan-Canadian approach to health care must start with federal investment in health infrastructure.



The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed serious weaknesses and gaps in our patchwork Canadian health system. However, the COVID-19 crisis has also given us the unique opportunity to see how best to rebuild our system to better meet current challenges and those sure to come. For the federal government, Wednesday's Speech from the Throne provides an important opportunity to increase support for health care infrastructure, a move that will have a significant, positive, and long-lasting impact on the health of Canadians.

Lack of federal leadership and support in health and health research has resulted in outdated, disjointed networks and systems that, as shown by COVID-19, are ineffective in emergency situations. While other countries rallied to produce real-time, national data on the growing COVID-19 crisis, Canada lagged. Federal infrastructure funding to enhance digital health platforms and strengthen cybersecurity is needed to shore up our health system's effectiveness in responding to emergencies.

HealthCareCAN members have identified the creation of a national digital health network, supported by strong cybersecurity systems as a national priority. This network would enable practitioners, system leaders and researchers to share critical information such as discoveries, drug and equipment shortages, and patient information throughout the continuum of care and across provincial and territorial borders. By producing and sharing this real-time data, resources could be sent where they are needed most. This system would also enable health leaders to provide the federal government with up-to-date reports on national health indicators.

Of course, these digital health networks would require strong cybersecurity systems to protect the valuable data they house. A pilot project currently underway at Eastern Health in Newfoundland and Labrador is a prime example of a program that could be ramped up nationally to address this very issue. With a federal investment of \$750 million over five years, this pilot could be expanded to create 15 regional “Centres of Excellence” across the country, greatly strengthening healthcare cybersecurity.

Digital health, however, is just one part of the infrastructure equation. Canada’s health system began the pandemic already limping badly due to crumbling infrastructure, underfunded facilities, and overburdened staff. Our nation’s frontline healthcare heroes continue to be forced to fight COVID-19 with one arm tied behind their backs.

Much of Canada’s current hospital infrastructure has aged beyond its useful life. Communities across the nation rely on dated facilities that are neither climate resilient, nor energy efficient. Health care facilities are among the oldest public infrastructure in use today with nearly half of all facilities being over 50 years old.

Investing in our aging healthcare infrastructure, including research laboratories and facilities within hospitals and long-term care facilities will improve quality of care and infection control, reduce wait-times, and provide critically needed surge capacity in the system. Rooms could be built for multiple purposes mind, ensuring no space is wasted. Upgraded research labs would attract and retain top talent, keeping Canada competitive and innovative. Building facilities better with our “new normal” in mind keeps patients and visitors safe by making physical distancing and other safety measures possible.

Historically, Canada’s chattering classes have vented *ad nauseum* that health care is a provincial responsibility. Political jurisdiction is of little importance to a patient hooked up to a ventilator battling COVID, or to a resident of a long-term care facility, or to someone waiting in pain for a hip replacement surgery that has been postponed. Federal investment in health care infrastructure is urgently needed and Canada’s defunct Hospital Construction Grant Program and the 1966 Health Resources Fund prove it can be provided.

While Wednesday’s Speech from the Throne cannot solve all of what ails Canada’s health care system, it can chart a new, sustainable course for health care that responds to the needs of Canadians. Isn’t that what political leadership is all about?

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