



## Open letter to Canada's Health Ministers

October 5, 2023

Dear Federal, Provincial and Territorial Health Ministers:

We are writing on behalf of [Cancer Action Now](#), an alliance of patient organizations, professional associations, and life sciences companies advocating to ensure Canadians have access to high-quality cancer care when and where they need it, towards the goal of improving cancer survivorship in Canada.

As you convene in Charlottetown on October 12 to discuss Canada's healthcare system, **we urge you to prioritize the hundreds of thousands of people living in Canada affected by delays and gaps in screening, diagnosis, treatment and surgery of all forms of cancers across the country.**

Cancer care has reached a crisis point because of widespread disruptions of screening, diagnosis, treatment and surgeries prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Statistics Canada, in 2020 diagnosis of cancer cases dropped 12.3% lower than the average annual rate over the previous five-year period, due to Canadians experiencing challenges accessing primary care and screening appointments cancelled.<sup>1</sup> This means more patients now are presenting with advanced stages of cancer, requiring aggressive treatments and more surgeries, adding more pressure and costs to already overburdened health systems.

We acknowledge the recent and ongoing efforts by your governments to address many of these challenges, including the progress achieved on health funding agreements to boost health system capacity. However, cancer patients and stakeholder groups across the country are concerned by the lack of focus on cancer care outcomes within these agreements. **We urge your governments to make cancer a priority and ensure that cancer is a focus when implementing provincial action plans on priority areas including: access to primary care, reducing surgical backlogs, access to mental health services and health data.**

We call on all Health Ministers to implement the recommendations below to ensure thousands of people in Canada touched by cancer and their families can access the care they need, where they need it, and live healthier, longer lives than anywhere else in the world. Health systems in Canada need long-term and adequate funding that includes dedicated funding streams for cancer care. New investments can come to fruition by leveraging new funding via the Canada Health Transfer and new health bilateral agreements:

1. **Invest in the health workforce** to increase the number of healthcare professionals, particularly specialists such as oncologists, and nurses, and support staff, to address staffing shortages around cancer care and reduce patient load. Furthermore, the expansion of healthcare teams is critically important so that physician's time can be spent productively.
2. **Enhance primary care** to improve early cancer detection and diagnosis. This includes conducting timely screenings, facilitating referrals to specialized care when necessary, ensuring early

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230516/dq230516c-eng.htm>



diagnosis, and delivering vital health education to patients and communities. An area of focus should be creating opportunities to enhance primary care provider knowledge of cancer types, associated symptoms, and establishing diagnosis pathways.<sup>2</sup>

3. **Address backlogs in cancer diagnosis and care** by increasing cancer screening and treatment capacity by at least 10% over pre-pandemic levels for a period of three years to regain ground we've lost due to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Resources should be allocated to expand and enhance cancer care facilities, diagnostic services, and treatment centers to reduce wait times and increase capacity.
4. **Foster data-enabled cancer care systems** by investing in the implementation of a pan-Canadian cancer data strategy to ensure accountability in care delivery, interoperability across the continuum of cancer care and transparent reporting on year-over-year progress against specific cancer metrics. This will improve the timeliness of data capture and availability, establish data quality indicators, ensure cancer data interoperability and integration, fill gaps on social determinants of health data and enhance collection of patient-reported outcomes and experience.
5. **Address access and inequity issues facing the cancer system**, such as access to therapies and innovative, genome-based therapies for cancer care and ensure the quality of care Canadians receive and how long they need to wait before they receive it, does not depend on which part of the country they live in. Equally important is enabling care at or closer to home.

Your governments have a responsibility and can tackle important priorities to improve cancer care in Canada, with particular attention on increasing the availability of primary care for all Canadians, improving data collection, bolstering health human resources, supporting team based interdisciplinary holistic care and ensuring equitable access to screening and treatment for all Canadians, no matter where they live.

Important signs of progress will be when we see more Canadians diagnosed with early-stage cancer, fewer diagnosed with late-stage cancer, and those living with cancer not just surviving but thriving. This will mean our cancer care system is truly responsive to the needs of Canadians it serves.

Please commit to taking cancer action now.

Sincerely,

The Cancer Action Now Alliance

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.all-can.org/news/ni-news/optimizing-diagnosis-in-canadian-cancer-care/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ijc.33884>