



Opinion

National surgical wait times strategy needed

The long waits lead to more pain and suffering, further deterioration of joints, more challenging surgeries, and increased costs to the health system and economy.

BY TRISH BARBATO

Imagine what it's like to live with constant pain. Every single move, a reminder of the debilitating ache in your joints. Each mundane activity, whether it's putting on socks or walking across the room, is both daunting and diminishes your sense of control.

Do I really need to leave the house today? Will my employer understand if I call in sick?



Health Minister Mark Holland and the federal government have a key role to play in co-ordinating efforts across jurisdictions and holding them accountable for meeting agreed-upon targets, writes Trish Barbato. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

How will my friends react if I cancel our plans? Unfortunately, this is a daily reality for six million people in Canada living with arthritis. This incurable disease erodes not only cartilage and bones, but also mental health and overall quality of life.

And if you think it's a disease reserved for the elderly, think again. About half of people with arthritis are under 65 years old, many of them diagnosed in their 30s and 40s (or earlier).

The impact of arthritis extends far beyond the individual—it is felt by families, workplaces, health-care systems, and the economy as a whole. The disease costs Canada an eye watering \$33-billion every single year in terms of health-care expenses and lost work days.

Unfortunately, increasing wait times for arthritis-related surgeries exacerbate these issues, and create further challenges downstream.

To put things in perspective, 99 per cent of knee and over 70 per cent of hip replacements are due to arthritis. However, more than one in three patients who require these surgeries are waiting longer than the established benchmark wait time target of six months, and the waits don't seem to be getting much better. This is despite many jurisdictions committing dollars and announcing strategies or task forces to reduce wait times.

And these surgery delays aren't trivial. They lead to more pain and suffering, further deterioration of joints, more challenging surgeries, and increased costs to the health system and economy.

We can't afford to keep Canadians waiting any longer. Our leaders must work together to address the massive bottlenecks in our health system that keep people waiting for these vital surgeries. And that doesn't necessarily mean committing more

funding (although that certainly helps).

What we need is a robust national strategy that focuses on reducing wait times by setting and tracking targets, optimizing resources, and leveraging innovative care models. The strategy must also focus on preventing the progression of arthritis through early intervention, and improved access to care and treatment to help reduce the need for surgery in the first place.

In this context, the federal government has an important role to play in co-ordinating efforts across jurisdictions by using its power of the purse to hold provinces and territories accountable for meeting agreed-upon surgery wait time targets and implementing best practices.

Provincial governments must also rise to the challenge by collaborating with health-care providers, patients, and other health system stakeholders to pinpoint current obstacles, set goals and implement measures to address them.

The bottom line is that we have a shared responsibility to alleviate patient suffering. A robust health system not only benefits patients but also supports caregivers and bolsters the economy. What we need now is the collective will to make it happen and the resounding support of our leaders to improve the lives of Canadians living with arthritis. The cost of inaction is too great.

Trish Barbato is president and CEO of Arthritis Society Canada.

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