

ARTHRITIS SOCIETY
NEW BRUNSWICK 2022 PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATION
SUBMISSION

Delivered to:
Hon. Ernie L. Steeves
Minister of Finance and Treasury Board

February 2022



INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Arthritis Society, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the New Brunswick, Minister of Finance 2022 pre-Budget consultations.

The Arthritis Society is Canada's national charity dedicated to extinguishing arthritis. We represent the six million Canadians living with arthritis today, and the millions more who are impacted or at risk. There is no cure for arthritis, and the pain it causes deprives people of time with friends and family, reduces mobility and diminishes quality of life. Arthritis is a leading cause of workplace disability and one of the major health challenges facing our health care system today.

With a growing and aging population, the number of people in New Brunswick living with arthritis is expected to grow. By 2035, nearly 190,000 New Brunswickers will have arthritis, many of them under the age of 65. Today, working-aged New Brunswickers with arthritis are twice as likely to report that they are not participating in the workforce compared to their peers without arthritis.

As you begin your budget consultations, we are pleased to provide four detailed recommendations, that will support the more than 150,000 New Brunswickers living with arthritis:

- 1. Improve wait times for joint replacement surgeries**
- 2. Invest in arthritis-specific primary and community care**
- 3. Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options**
- 4. Expand access and remove the provincial sales tax on medical cannabis**

1. Improve wait times for joint replacement surgeries

Arthritis is the leading cause of joint replacement, including over 99% of knee replacements and more than 70% of hip replacements. With the number of people with arthritis expected to balloon by 2035, even more people will need joint replacements.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on wait times and has exacerbated the issue through the delay or cancellation of surgeries. According to CIHI [data](#) during the first six months of the pandemic (April 1 to September 30, 2020), in New Brunswick the number of surgeries meeting wait time benchmarks decreased by 19% for both hip and knee replacements compared to the previous year. CIHI data also shows inconsistency across the province in meeting targets, with some regions having a much lower percentage meeting the six-month target.

This prolonged wait is leading to unnecessary pain and suffering for many New Brunswickers who are prevented from contributing to their families, communities, and workplaces. There are potential downstream health impacts that increased wait times have for arthritis patients waiting for joint replacement surgery, such as the increased use of opioids for pain relief. Surgery delays are not only devastating for individuals but can also lead to significant additional costs for the healthcare system due to the associated co-morbidities, including weight gain, diabetes, heart and circulatory issues, mental health conditions, and other compounding health challenges.

The Arthritis Society's report [The Wait: Addressing Canada's Critical Backlog of Hip and Knee Replacement Surgeries](#) provides a wide-range of solutions to innovate and achieve effective patient-centred care both provincially and national that include:



- a. Ensuring innovative models of care are replicated and shared widely so more patients have access to their benefits
- b. Standardizing how patient data is collected and reported to make it easier to set national standards and benchmarks
- c. Leveraging digital technology to reduce wait times, maximize limited health resources and improve co-ordination of care
- d. Increasing access to community-based joint health management programs (e.g., GLA:D <https://gladcanada.ca/>), so more patients have access to proven programs that effectively manage pain pre-op and better optimize results post-op
- e. Ensuring savings from surgical efficiencies are re-invested into improving patient care.

We support the government's plan announced in November to reduce surgical wait times by half by the fall of 2023. We encourage the government to work with all stakeholders, including our organization to continue to move forward and to look at different, innovative approaches and solutions to reduce wait times.

2. Invest in arthritis-specific primary and community care

As arthritis has such a profound impact on quality of life, including the ability to work, patients require access to a team of health care providers, including general practitioners, rheumatologists, dermatologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and social workers. Team-based arthritis-specific care is important to the long-term sustainability of our health care system and will better support people who live with arthritis and other forms of chronic disease.

There is an urgent need in rural and under-served areas for increased access to this model of arthritis care. These areas often have limited or no health care providers essential to improve diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing management of the disease.

Virtual care, its use during COVID-19 and lessons learned, should be incorporated into the planning of potential models of care and the patient perspective should be an integral part of that process.

3. Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options

As there is no cure for arthritis, pharmacological treatments play an important role in management of the condition, which typically persists for many years, if not a lifetime. It is vital that there be a range of treatment options available, as people with arthritis respond differently to different treatments. In the case of inflammatory arthritis, for example, treatments are still very much trial and error: what works for one person may not for another; it is about finding the right treatment at the right time. A range of choices and solutions is therefore critical.

We were pleased to be consulted on New Brunswick's Biosimilars Initiative and we support the policy. We value our strong working partnership with the government and look forward to continuing this collaboration. It is critical that savings from the biosimilars initiative continue to be reinvested in greater access to treatment options and improving access to patient care.



4. Expand access and remove the provincial tax on medical cannabis

For many people living with the fire of arthritis, medical cannabis is an important pain management option. At least half of Canadians using medical cannabis use it to manage chronic pain, like pain from arthritis. About 1 in 4 Canadian adults using medical cannabis use it to manage arthritis, specifically.

Expanding access to allow the distribution of medical cannabis through pharmacies will create a clear distinction between medical cannabis and cannabis for other uses. It will also help to ensure that patients receive reliable education on safe and effective use from trained healthcare professionals. This will also help facilitate reimbursement by health insurance plans.

Although cannabis for medical purposes is authorized by healthcare practitioners as medicine, it is not treated as such in key aspects of policy around access and affordability. Applying any tax to medical cannabis is inconsistent with the taxation of prescription drugs and medical necessities. The costs associated with the use of cannabis for medical purposes (sometimes upwards of \$500/month) can put an enormous financial strain on patients, particularly during the pandemic. Exempting the provincial tax for medical cannabis would provide some financial relief for patients during this difficult time.

It is important to note that removing the provincial tax portion on medical cannabis would not preclude the government from continuing to levy the provincial tax portion on recreational cannabis, which represents most cannabis-related revenues in New Brunswick. In fact, it would further underscore a clear and important distinction between medical versus recreational cannabis, paving the way for medical cannabis to be recognized and treated as medicine.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we urge the Government of New Brunswick to implement our four key 2022 pre-Budget recommendations that will add cost-effective sustainability to the healthcare system and support a healthy population of New Brunswickers.

Sincerely,



Jone Mitchell
Executive Director, Atlantic
Arthritis Society
Cell: 902.223.8269
jmitchell@arthritis.ca

About the Arthritis Society

The Arthritis Society is Canada's national charity dedicated to fighting the fire of arthritis with the fire of research, advocacy and information and support. With the support of our donors and volunteers, we are all in to end arthritis, so people with arthritis can live their best life free from arthritis. The Arthritis Society is accredited under Imagine Canada's Standards Program.

