



**Neighbourhood  
Pharmacy**  
Association of Canada

Association canadienne  
**des pharmacies  
de quartier**

## **Ontario 2020 Budget Submission**

**Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada**

October 16, 2020

## Summary of Recommendations

**RECOMMENDATION #1:** Once available, ensure pharmacies are engaged and supported in distributing and administering the COVID-19 vaccine.

**RECOMMENDATION #2:** Enable pharmacists to offer publicly funded routine vaccines by building on the success of the influenza program, streamlining the distribution of these vaccines through the pharmaceutical supply chain, and expanding access to publicly funded vaccines through community pharmacies.

**RECOMMENDATION #3:** Enable pharmacist-administered point of care testing to support disease screening initiatives, including rapid COVID-19 testing, and ensure patients' therapies are being appropriately monitored in real-time for potential toxicities and effectiveness, as well as by providing pharmacists with the ability to order and access lab tests.

**RECOMMENDATION #4:** Make the investments and enact the proposed changes to scope of practice necessary to enable patients to see a trained pharmacist close to home for the assessment and, if necessary, treatment of common ailments.

## 1. Introduction

Ontario is facing an unprecedented challenge. COVID-19 has changed our lives, strained our health system, and enormously impacted provincial coffers. The government reacted swiftly and decisively to combat this global pandemic, but we can learn much from the first wave of COVID-19. Drawing on public health leaders and frontline care providers' expertise, including pharmacists, we can leverage the expertise of every health professional and every point of care in Ontario to provide excellent care effectively, efficiently, and compassionately.

Pharmacy is proud to stand hand-in-hand with government and our partners across the health system on the frontlines of this fight. We are eager to continue to work together to bolster this vital sector as we prepare for potential future waves of COVID-19.

Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada (Neighbourhood Pharmacies) represents Canada's leading pharmacy organizations, including chain, banner, long-term care, specialty pharmacies, and grocery chains and mass merchandisers with pharmacies. Our focus is on improving the delivery of care. We advocate for pharmacies' role in caring for Canadians, behind and in front of the counter. We aim to advance healthcare for Ontarians by leveraging over 4,600 community pharmacies conveniently located in neighbourhoods across the province as integral points of patient care. The economic footprint of the community pharmacy sector in Ontario is over \$6.3 billion and 94,200 jobs<sup>1</sup>.

### *Pharmacy in COVID-19*

As experts in drug therapies and medication management, pharmacists are routinely relied on by patients for advice and care. Pharmacists are often the first and most frequent touchpoint most patients have with the healthcare system, with most Canadians seeing their pharmacist up to ten times more frequently than any other healthcare provider<sup>2</sup>. This fact has particularly emerged during the ongoing pandemic, where pharmacy was designated an Essential Service. Throughout the unfolding health crisis, Ontario pharmacists have taken risks to serve their patients and communities every single day. Pharmacies have emerged as an essential link in our health system and central to keeping our economy running throughout the pandemic. We are proud of our members and the tens of thousands of retail workers, pharmacists and others on the frontlines.

Pharmacists play an integral role ensuring continuity of care, delivering influenza immunizations, expanding testing capacity through pharmacy-based COVID-19 testing, and protecting pharmaceutical supply, so all Ontarians can access the medicines they need. Most recently, empowering pharmacists to offer COVID-19 testing to asymptomatic individuals has helped to cut down wait times and given Ontarians a convenient and trusted option to protect their health and their families. Allowing pharmacies to offer the high-dose seasonal influenza vaccine will help protect vulnerable seniors while relieving pressure on primary care and hospitals. We applaud the government for its leadership, decisive action and for recognition of the critical role of pharmacies in the health system. And *more* can be done to leverage the role of trusted, expert pharmacists and conveniently accessible pharmacies.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.conferenceboard.ca/temp/3ecac3f7-7390-4253-8a94-6f3f8c84f9cf/9657\\_Pharmacist\\_Neighbourhood\\_ON\\_BR.pdf](https://www.conferenceboard.ca/temp/3ecac3f7-7390-4253-8a94-6f3f8c84f9cf/9657_Pharmacist_Neighbourhood_ON_BR.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Tsuyuki, R.T. Pharmacists as accessible primary health care providers: Review of the evidence. Canadian Pharmacists Journal. 151(1): pages 4-5. January 2018.

Pharmacy and pharmacists are ready and willing to take on a greater role to deliver better, more efficient care in the community for Ontarians. Already Ontario had set out on a course of health system transformation. The current health crisis affords a unique opportunity to move even more quickly and decisively to create more seamless and connected care—change that puts the people of Ontario first. The decisions made now can strengthen our province for generations to come.

## **2. Fighting COVID-19**

With COVID-19 cases again on the rise, people in every corner of this province rely more than ever on the care and services they receive in pharmacy. We strongly believe more can be done to empower pharmacies and pharmacists to protect the communities they serve.

Pharmacy professionals do more than dispense prescriptions – they are integral players in primary care and public and population health. With close to 4,600 points of care in communities from the remote north to the heart of downtown Toronto, pharmacies are uniquely positioned to expand capacity and mitigate the strains placed on the healthcare system as we navigate and prepare for future waves of this virus. Enabling pharmacists to deliver further assistance can help keep patients out of hospital and alleviate pressures on other healthcare resources, including family physicians and telehealth, reducing hallway medicine, and keeping people safe.

### *COVID-19 Vaccine*

We know that the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine will be crucial to ending the ongoing pandemic. Pharmacists are already significant and direct contributors to vaccine-related public health programs for influenza. For many Ontarians, local pharmacies are the preferred venue for receiving a range of common vaccines: close to 50 per cent of Canadians receive their flu shot at their pharmacy, with nearly 1.4 million doses administered through Ontario pharmacies in 2019-20. Pharmacists' accessibility and longitudinal relationships with patients allow them to provide education and awareness, increase vaccination rates, and support adherence through multiple touchpoints over patients' life span.

We have seen significant success with pharmacist-administered influenza programs. Indeed, recently-conducted polling indicated that the great majority of Canadians (88 per cent) said they are confident with the quality of care provided by pharmacists – more than for family doctors (83 per cent) or walk-in clinics (77 per cent).<sup>3</sup> We know that pharmacists can further support public health initiatives with other vaccines. Additionally, we have seen significant improvements in efficiency and significant reductions in waste when pharmaceutical supply chains are leveraged to distribute vaccines. When a COVID-19 vaccine is available, public health and primary care capacity will be challenged to provide widespread immunization. Community pharmacy is poised to help.

### **RECOMMENDATION #1: Once available, ensure pharmacies are engaged and supported in distributing and administering the COVID-19 vaccine.**

COVID-19 vaccine administration through community pharmacy offers a valuable opportunity to collect, integrate, analyze, and mobilize data through provincial drug program claims. Pharmacies are also well positioned to provide information on the number of vaccines per region to identify immunization rates and behaviour patterns. This information can be integrated with other provincial

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<sup>3</sup> Polling conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights, August 11-16, 2020. Online survey conducted among a randomly selected sample of N=1,000 Canadians who are parents with at least n child aged 16 or under.

public health data to contribute to improved analysis and modelling. This would further integrate pharmacy's digital infrastructure with the primary care and public health network, creating stronger, more accurate community resources for patients and healthcare providers.

### 3. Reducing Strain on Our Health System

The first wave of COVID-19 stressed Ontario's healthcare system. The second wave will stretch it even further. But there is an opportunity to leverage pharmacists' expertise and trusted relationships with their patients to reduce the burden on primary and acute care, reduce disruptions or delays to patient care, support public health units, and offer a more convenient option to millions of Ontarians. Moreover, the proposed changes outlined below will benefit Ontarians long after COVID-19 has receded.

#### *Routine Immunizations*

Across Ontario, many Public Health Units are unable to offer routine vaccinations through schools for the fall of 2020<sup>4</sup>. While students may receive these vaccines from their family physician or public health clinics, in many cases the capacity may not exist throughout the pandemic and these solutions may be impractical or inaccessible to many parents.

In the polling referenced above, about half of all Canadians (48 per cent) indicated that they have postponed or decided not to go to the doctor's office or a walk-in clinic because of a COVID-19-related reason. Many (40 per cent) are concerned that their child may miss routine vaccinations as a result. Indeed, more than a third (34 per cent) of parents with kids 12 or younger have missed or postponed vaccinations because of COVID-19.

Pharmacists currently have scope of practice to administer most routine vaccines currently offered through public health, like human papillomavirus (HPV), and most of these vaccines can be administered without a prescription. However, pharmacists are barred from offering publicly funded vaccines like HPV to their patients. This sets up a fundamental inequity. And this challenge exists not only for routine childhood immunizations like HPV, but also for adult immunizations such as the pneumonia and shingles vaccines, among others.

Pharmacies have robust vaccine supply chains in place and experience in managing vaccines and vaccination programs. Pharmacies have the infrastructure, and pharmacists can help clear the backlog of routine immunizations and fill the gap created by the suspension of school-based programs.

**RECOMMENDATION #2: Enable pharmacists to offer publicly funded routine vaccines by building on the success of the influenza program, streamlining the distribution of these vaccines through the pharmaceutical supply chain, and expanding access to publicly funded vaccines through community pharmacies.**

#### *Point of Care Testing*

The Ontario government understands that widespread testing will be vital to ensure Ontario's economy and schools can remain safely open as much as possible, and to bend the curve of this resurgent pandemic. Government also sees that community pharmacies are the health system's most

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/hpv-vaccinations-cancelled-ontario-cancer-risk-pandemic-1.5757061>

convenient touchpoint for millions of Ontarians. That's why pharmacy has been empowered to offer COVID-19 testing to asymptomatic patients in communities across the province.

It's time to take the next step in order to further reduce strain on primary and acute care and to benefit Ontarians beyond the current crisis. Pharmacists are the primary providers of medication management services. They are routinely consulted by patients and other healthcare providers for advice on medication dosing, effectiveness, and safety. Pharmacists presently have the scope to renew and adapt chronic prescriptions but, to date, have been reliant on various secondary sources of information to support this very important clinical decision-making. This is not conducive to providing effective care, nor is it in the best interest of patients. Enabling pharmacists to use point of care tests and ensuring they can access electronic health records and lab tests supports better medication management and clinical decision making, leading to safer, more effective, efficient patient experiences and outcomes. This approach will also help keep patients out of doctors' offices as COVID-19 runs its course.

Government is currently considering proposed regulatory changes to allow pharmacists to perform certain point of care tests for chronic disease management, as a parallel, complementary and more convenient track to current laboratory monitoring. We encourage the enactment of these proposed regulatory changes brought forward by the Ontario College of Pharmacists. We encourage the broadening of these proposed regulatory changes to include point of care testing for screening and diagnosis, which would further support pharmacy-based COVID-19 testing in a way that is accessible, that helps to reduce the load and backlog for labs, and that captures results and can make them available in real-time to government.

**RECOMMENDATION #3: Enable pharmacist-administered point of care testing to support disease screening initiatives, including rapid COVID-19 testing, and ensure patients' therapies are being appropriately monitored in real-time for potential toxicities and effectiveness, as well as by providing pharmacists with the ability to order and access lab tests.**

#### *Minor Ailments*

Ontario is also considering potential scope of practice changes submitted by the Ontario College of Pharmacists, submitted at the request of the Minister of Health, to help reduce pressure on primary care while offering patients convenient and trusted options. This change would allow pharmacists to assess and treat common ailments like insect bites, sprains and strains, allergies, and cold sores, among others, allowing Ontarians to conveniently receive treatment and care in pharmacy for these conditions.

Under the status quo, despite their knowledge of the appropriate treatments and protocols by virtue of their intensive training, expertise and experience, pharmacists often feel helpless to help patients and are obliged to refer them to another healthcare professional. This referral process needlessly takes time away from physicians and other primary care or emergency care providers while increasing patients' risk of exposure to COVID-19 by requiring travel to multiple sites to receive basic care.

Maximizing pharmacists' ability to deliver the care they have the training and expertise to provide will ensure patients access the high-quality care they need faster and bring better value to our healthcare system. We urge government to move forward with the College's proposed changes and make the necessary investments to ensure pharmacists are fairly compensated for these services.

**RECOMMENDATION #4: Make the investments and enact the proposed changes to scope of practice necessary to enable patients to see a trained pharmacist close to home for the assessment and, if necessary, treatment of common ailments.**

## **5. Conclusion**

In Ontario and across the globe, COVID-19 has posed an enormous challenge—and a considerable opportunity to implement changes that will benefit people for years to come.

We can learn from the gaps in our health system that this crisis has exposed, and from the many swift, decisive actions we have taken in response. Together, we can build a future where, when a person is sick, they can access a variety of common diagnostic tests at their local pharmacy, without waiting for a doctor's appointment or going to the emergency room. Ontarians with mild illness and minor ailments could get an examination, diagnosis, and prescription at the pharmacy down the street – and return home with the treatment that will make them better. They can conveniently and safely access needed routine vaccinations. All of this will reduce the pressure placed on our family doctors and hospital emergency departments while maximizing healthcare investments.

We believe that with a collaborative approach that engages critical stakeholders and empowers health providers, we can best protect Ontarians from COVID-19, fight this illness, build the foundation for long-term improvements in our health system, and return to a path toward fiscal balance.