

Neighbourhood Pharmacies and CPhA weigh in on federal election platforms

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They also outline their own priorities going into the 2019 election

Two national groups that represent the professional and commercial interests of pharmacists and pharmacies across Canada say they're happy that most major parties in the federal election campaign have made big promises in regards to healthcare and pharmacare.

But they are stopping short of endorsing one party's platform over another, pointing instead to their own platforms on how best to deal with Canada's most pressing drug-related issues.

"We are encouraged by the focus that healthcare issues—pharmacare in particular—are receiving this election," Sandra Hanna, interim CEO of Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada, wrote in a recent email to *Pharmacy Practice + Business*. "It's critically important we discuss the health care challenges Canadians are facing."

Hanna said her group continues to study the details of the election promises about planned improvements to healthcare made earlier this week by the Liberals, the New Democratic Party and the Green Party.

What the parties are proposing

On Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised that a re-elected Liberal government would spend \$6 billion as a "down payment" for the implementation of a national pharmacare program, among other health care initiatives. The Liberal pharmacare plan would involve the creation of both a national list of covered drugs and a Canada Drug Agency that would be responsible for buying those drugs.

The plan follows many recommendations made by a panel led by former Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins, which estimated the starting cost of a national pharmacare program in 2022 at \$3.5 billion. That amount would rise to \$15.3 billion annually by 2027.

For its part, the NDP has promised to spend \$10 billion a year to make prescription drugs and related medical devices free starting in 2020, a move that would save Canadian families \$500 a year.

The Greens have also pledged support for universal pharmacare, saying it supports the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on Health to expand the Canada Health Act to include prescription drugs dispensed outside of a hospital as "the best way to accomplish both life-saving and cost-cutting goals."

The Tories have not yet released their plans in regards to national prescription drug coverage. However, in a news release on Monday, Sept. 23, the Tories said the Liberals approach would “leave the door wide open to banning employer drug coverage.”

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“Only Andrew Scheer and the Conservative Party,” it added, “can be trusted to maintain and increase healthcare spending by 3% per year.”

That puts only the Tories at odds—so far—with the main planks in the platforms released at the beginning of the election campaign by both the NPAC and the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

What the NPAC and CPhA are calling for

In its [platform](#), the NPAC is calling for action on two core issues: ensuring access to the medications Canadians need, and finding comprehensive and lasting solutions to the ongoing opioid crisis.

In its [election platform](#), the CPhA is asking parties to commit to five acute healthcare issues: drug shortages, opioid dependency, access to healthcare, access to drug coverage, and support for medical cannabis patients.

“I think there’s an opportunity here for parties to make some concrete commitments to the health of Canadians,” Joelle Walker, vice president, public affairs with the CPhA, said in a phone interview. “Some of the issues we raise, especially drug shortages, are growing in importance.”

In its platform preamble, the CPhA argues that while Canadians are proud of their public healthcare system, “it is well known that the system has been struggling to keep up with our evolving health care needs.” An aging population, new technologies and increased economic pressures on families and government have made it necessary, it adds, “to find health care solutions that will apply our health resources effectively and sustainably and provide care where and when people need it most.”

The CPhA argues that Canadian pharmacists are well placed to both identify and suggest solutions for front-line health care issues because they see some 10 million patients a week and provide care and services in communities across the country. “As the most frequent point of contact between Canadians and the health care system, pharmacists can attest to the barriers faced by patients in accessing medication and health-care services,” reads the CPhA’s platform.

In regards to drug shortages, the national lobby group is calling on federal parties to commit to implementing an action plan that would help to ensure a stable drug supply. That plan would include doing research into root causes of the problem, ensuring international leadership by Canada to find solutions, and support for frontline healthcare providers “who are struggling to manage supply disruptions.”

Similarly, CPhA is calling on Canada’s federal political parties to commit to tackling the opioid crisis by supporting a three-pronged program that aims to improve prescription monitoring, provide counselling and education for first-time opioid patients, and increase capacity and access to opioid tapering and dependency treatment options.

The CPhA is also calling for improved access to healthcare through better use of professionals like pharmacists, improved prescription drug access and coverage, and better access and care for medical cannabis patients.

For Hanna, whose group represents operators of some 6,500 chain, banner and franchise pharmacies and grocery chains and big retailers with pharmacies, many Canadians are preoccupied by two core pharmacare-centred issues: ensuring access to prescription drugs and dealing with the opioid crisis.

"We encourage government to keep patients at the heart of their decision making, especially where pharmacare and the opioid crisis are concerned," said Hanna, a practising pharmacist in Guelph, Ont. who served the past two years as the NPAC's vice president, pharmacy affairs.

She noted that nearly 2 million Canadians currently do not have access to prescription drug coverage. To address that coverage shortfall, the NPAC is calling on political parties to endorse its Complete the Plan approach, which calls for the creation of a mixed-payer pharmacare model that would cover all Canadians under an affordable public drug plan.

"We're proposing a responsible, Canadian-made solution that will keep costs down and focus on people who need pharmacare the most," said Hanna. "All Canadians deserve access to the medications they need to live a healthy life. No one should have to decide between paying for prescription medications or putting food on the table."

She added that when it comes to access to medication, the NPAC believes resources should be focused on ensuring coverage for the uninsured and underinsured.

"This model will save billions in unnecessary costs, thereby preserving funds for other significant health care priorities including seniors care, mental health, and home care," said Hanna.

To tackle the opioid crisis, the NPAC is calling for a number of national initiatives, including a pharmacy-delivered pain management program, increased naloxone accessibility, including pharmacists as practitioners under the federal Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, and authorizing pharmacies to dispense and distribute medical marijuana and cannabis health products.

"Pharmacies are on the frontlines yet pharmacists have limited ability to help under current regulations," said Hanna.

Enabling pharmacists to prescribe and deprescribe controlled drugs and substances, added Hanna, would give government a community-based tool to both support prevention and increase access to opioid dependence treatments. "Our goal is to make sure these important issues are being raised and discussed," said Hanna. "At the end of the day our main priority is that the best possible healthcare is achieved."
