

A Made-in-Canada Approach to Pharmacare

If there is one lesson that Canadians sent Ottawa in the 2019 election -- it's that it's time for our federal politicians to start working together.

For better or for worse, Canadians want their minority government to work together to responsibly address the nation's biggest challenges – including fighting climate change, managing a changing economy and caring for an aging population.

In a country that is seemingly more divided than ever, how could this collaboration work? And what could it look like?



Sandra Hanna is a community pharmacist and pharmacy owner in Guelph, Ontario. Sandra is also the Chief Executive Officer of the Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada.

One of the first places we can look for co-operation is on pharmacare. This is an issue that is important to me both personally and professionally. It is also an issue of increasing importance to Canadians of all political stripes, with widespread agreement that no Canadian should ever be denied access to life-saving medications because of cost.

Where there are different opinions is on how a future pharmacare program could be delivered.

The Liberal government has clearly expressed a goal to expand access to medications for Canadians, though they have yet to share their specific direction for their policy.

They are flanked on one side by a Green Party and NDP who are demanding an immediate shift to a single

drug program for all Canadians; and, on the other side, a Conservative Party advocating a more limited plan that focuses on expanding access to medications for rare diseases. And the Bloc Quebecois would rather keep their own program than adopt a national one.

As for Canada's Premiers, they are looking for certainty when it comes to long-term health care for their current provincial medicare costs, before signing on to yet another national program.

So where does this leave us?

It could leave us at risk of a gridlocked situation where politicians once again are stuck promising a pharmacare program that they then fail to deliver.

Or we could finally work together, across party lines, to develop a plan that works best for Canadians.

As a pharmacist and pharmacy owner in Guelph, Ontario, I understand both the pharmacology behind medication therapy and the needs of patients in our communities. It is clear, the biggest public health care challenge facing Canada is to provide

immediate help for Canadians who are currently without drug coverage, to ensure they can afford the medicines they need.

I have yet to hear a single politician from any party in Parliament disagree with this goal. It is unacceptable that in our universal health care system, there are still some people who lack prescription drug coverage. Addressing this need is essential to living up to the promise of medicare.

Pharmacists know all too well the pain and anxiety that those without coverage endure. In fact, as pharmacists, we are often on the frontlines helping patients navigate drug coverage to gain access to the medicines they need. Canada is a wealthy and caring country – we need to do better.

But that doesn't mean we should be irresponsible with how we invest in a pharmacare program – especially when there are many health care challenges facing our system, including growing wait times for medical procedures and increasing demand for mental health services.

One of the largest issues facing prescription drug coverage is the extremely high cost of drugs for rare diseases, complex immune disorders and many cancers. In these instances, public coverage should be provided as a logical and humane extension of the principle that everyone, no matter how severe their condition, deserves treatment. This is something on which all parties already agree.

Scrapping the current drug plans most Canadians have and replacing them with one pharmacare program will require excruciating negotiations with every Canadian province and even then, we will still end up with an annual price tag of \$15 billion dollars.

Much of this money would end up being spent on people who already enjoy high quality drug coverage via their workplace plans.

We can tackle this problem collaboratively by bringing together the best ideas from all the parties and building a made-in-Canada solution. This will ensure those who don't have coverage, or whose coverage is inadequate, get the support they need. Those who have coverage through an existing plan should keep it.

Here's a place we can start to achieve an immediate, cost-effective solution: establishing a national pharmacare program that focuses on Canadians who don't already have prescription drug coverage. Every health care dollar should be directed to the people in the greatest need.

It's time to replace promises with real action. It's time to stop treating pharmacare like a political football and hold politicians accountable for delivering real improvements today. Let's ensure every Canadian can afford the medicines they need.

I urge our politicians to commit to a pharmacare plan that works for all Canadians.



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