



Open letter to Health Ministers

January 18, 2016

Dear Health Ministers,

As you prepare to meet with your federal, provincial and territorial counterparts in Vancouver in the coming days, we would like to extend an offer of support and assistance with regards to some of the areas you will be discussing and take this opportunity to raise some specific issues for pharmacists.

In addition to being the experts in drug therapies and medication management, pharmacists provide frontline health services to their patients and are an integral part of our health system. They are also leaders in innovative health care practices. Recognizing their contribution and unique training, pharmacists' scopes of practice have rapidly expanded across the country beyond drug dispensing. In fact, depending on the province, pharmacists are now able to provide core services such as assessment and prescribing for minor ailments, immunizations and vaccinations, as well as medication review and counseling, just to name a few.

However, there are many critical health issues and challenges within the health care system that must still be addressed. We would like to draw your attention to three issues of particular importance:

1. **Access to drugs:** Ensuring that patients have access to the medications that they need without undue financial hardship, regardless of where they live, is a central priority for Canadian pharmacists. Much of the focus has been solely on cost containment through reductions in generic drug costs, bulk purchasing and product listing agreements by government payers. Despite the cost savings achieved through these measures, too many Canadians find themselves unable to afford their needed medications. There is a disparity in provincial drug coverage plans that means, by virtue of geography, some Canadians go without treatment. **Therefore, we strongly urge you to consider solutions that prioritize patient needs and health outcomes, and work towards the harmonization of prescription medication coverage and pharmacy services for all Canadians. Pharmacists have a key role to play in ensuring patients get the most benefit from their medications through medication adherence programs and the promotion of effective prescribing.**
2. **Assisted dying:** As a result of the Supreme Court's ruling on assisted dying, much of the debate has focused on the responsibilities and protections afforded to physicians. However, this is an issue that will have a significant impact on hospital and community pharmacists – not only as members of interdisciplinary patient care teams, but also as the dispensers of drug therapies. **As you begin to develop legislative frameworks for assisted dying, we urge you to consult with pharmacists through CPhA and its provincial associations, in order to better understand the impact on the profession including their rights to conscientious objections, and to ensure that any legislation enables pharmacists to deliver the best possible end of life care to Canadians.**
3. **Prescription drug abuse:** Prescription drug abuse continues to be a serious problem in Canada. In many cases, pharmacists are the first health care providers to notice a prescription drug problem in a patient. All too often there is little opportunity for the appropriate co-ordination between pharmacists and prescribing physicians to identify potential drug dependency problems with patients. Effective collaboration is made difficult because of inadequate communication technologies such as electronic health records and shared prescription drug records which are not in place. Earlier identification of potential problems is key to lasting solutions. We must also develop controls that reduce the diversion of certain medications while protecting access for patients who require these medications. **While many provinces have tracking systems in place, we urge you to collaborate towards the development of a robust national tracking system that would further reduce diversion and refocus efforts to implement e-prescribing and electronic health records in all provinces.**



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Beyond these specific issues, we are also increasingly concerned with some of the challenges that indigenous peoples face within the health care system. We look forward to working with all levels of government to ensure equitable access to drug therapies and pharmacy services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

While much progress has been made in expanding pharmacists' scopes of practice in Canada, there is more that can be done across the country to enhance pharmacists' ability to provide quality patient-focused care. Legislative change, adequate funding for pharmacy services, education and training are all needed to ensure pharmacists are being used to their maximum benefit.

Pharmacists must be part of the ongoing discussions on the future of health care in Canada. We have a key role to play in reducing the strains on the primary health care system by improving access and contributing to better health outcomes for Canadians. On behalf of pharmacists from across the country, we wish you a successful and productive meeting.

Sincerely,

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