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MEDIA RELEASE

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Canadian
Physiotherapy
Association Association
canadienne de
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ONTARIO HEALTH CARE GAP

Study shows ongoing need for improved access to rehabilitation services

TORONTO - A newly published study has shown that Ontario's health care system may be failing vulnerable populations including those suffering from chronic conditions, those without private health insurance, and those living in less urban areas. Some 3,000 family physicians and 1,100 physiotherapists from Ontario were surveyed to identify how funding and wait times act as barriers to accessing physiotherapy services. The study, published in *Physiotherapy Canada*, was conducted by researchers at the Arthritis Community Research and Evaluation Unit and University of Toronto.

By the numbers:

64% Unacceptable – Number of physicians who felt wait times for rehabilitation were unacceptable

3.6x Longer waits - Wait times for publicly funded physiotherapy treatments were 3.6 times longer than for privately funded treatments

150 Days – The longest reported wait for physiotherapy services

17% Now without access – Access to rehabilitation services has likely deteriorated since the time of the initial study due to the delisting of physiotherapy services at Schedule 5 clinics. A subsequent study found that 17.7 per cent of patients who required physiotherapy services did not receive treatment because they were uninsured or were not able to pay privately.

10x Better health with access to physiotherapy – The same follow-up study found that individuals who received required physiotherapy services were 10 times as likely to report having good health compared to those who did not receive required services.

The areas of greatest concern are access to publicly funded rehabilitation services, and wait times for services in Northern and Eastern Ontario. Lead author Dr. Cheryl Cott, an Associate Professor in the Department of Physical Therapy at the University of Toronto, says, "This study highlights the fact that some people in Ontario do not have sufficient access to the right professional." She adds, "What is critical at this point is to use these and other research findings as a stimulus to move forward in developing realistic and sustainable rehabilitation solutions for Canadians."

Many physicians surveyed for the study said that they saw the cost of private rehabilitation and long wait times as barriers to referring patients to physiotherapy and occupational therapy (PT/OT). One respondent said, "As a physician I can appreciate the effectiveness of PT/OT over (medications) in many situations – it saddens me the lack of availability of publicly funded PT/OT and the horrendous waits for the few locations that offer it."

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Dr. Michel D. Landry, President of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, Physiotherapist, and health services researcher at the University of Toronto says, “This study signals that access to physiotherapy and rehabilitation services has reached a critical point in the last five years.” He adds that further research conducted since the data collection phase of Dr. Cott’s study has demonstrated that access to physiotherapy services matters. Dr. Landry reports, “In later research on the delisting of publicly funded physiotherapy clinics, published in the *International Journal of Rehabilitation*, we found that 17.7% of Ontario patients simply stopped attending physiotherapy after delisting because they did not have private health insurance or couldn’t afford to continue.” These patients were 10 times more likely to have poor self-reported health than those who continued with treatment, suggesting that they may end up looking for publicly-funded services elsewhere such as the doctor’s office or emergency room.

“Poor access to necessary rehabilitative services is an issue across Canada, the consequences of which will be detrimental to the overall health status of Canadians, especially as the population continues to age, and as the incidence of chronic diseases such as arthritis increase at an alarming pace,” adds Landry.

In 2005 the Ontario government delisted OHIP-covered physiotherapy services with some exceptions. Kim Wolny, President of the Ontario Physiotherapy Association (OPA) says, “The delisting of physiotherapy services coupled with ongoing reduction of services provided to communities through hospital out-patient clinics, have led to a crisis in access to needed physiotherapy services. The Ontario government has yet to deliver on assurances for reasonable access to publicly funded physiotherapy, but we will be making special efforts during the forthcoming election campaign to get politicians’ attention on this important issue that potentially affects every resident of Ontario.”

Ms. Wolny explains that physiotherapy provided in hospitals is an insured service under the *Canada Health Act* (CHA). “That’s why the growing deterioration in access to publicly funded physiotherapy is so troubling, because it amounts to governments failing their commitments under the CHA and to the increasing privatization of this important component of health care.”

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About *Physiotherapy Canada*:

Physiotherapy Canada is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal that promotes excellence in physiotherapy by providing an international forum for the publication and review of original research. The journal is an official publication of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA).

About CPA

Canadian Physiotherapy Association is the professional organization representing 10,000 members. It provides leadership and direction to the physiotherapy profession, fosters excellence in practice, education and research, and promotes high standards of health in Canada. More information is available at www.physiotherapy.ca.

About OPA

The Ontario Physiotherapy Association is a voluntary professional association for physiotherapists in Ontario, for students studying physiotherapy at any of five Ontario university physiotherapy programs and physiotherapist support personnel. The Ontario Physiotherapy Association is the Ontario branch of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association representing over 4,500 members.

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