



**Neighbourhood  
Pharmacy**  
Association of Canada

Association canadienne  
**des pharmacies  
de quartier**

## **Let's Talk Budget 2021**

**By: Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of  
Canada**

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We are at a critical juncture in the fight against COVID-19. With approved vaccines slowly deploying across Canada and additional vaccines working their way through trials and approvals, we see a light at the end of the very long tunnel we've been in. But with troubling new virus variants bringing the prospect of increased transmissibility we're not nearly through this crisis yet.

We are in a race to vaccinate as many people as possible before dangerous new strains establish themselves. To win, we must leverage the expertise of every health professional and every point of care in every community across the province. There is no excuse for doing less than all we can. The Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada (Neighbourhood Pharmacies) appreciates the measures taken by the Canadian government to protect public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize the enormous strain the pandemic continues to place on the economy and public health system.

**Pharmacies have the capacity to deliver up to 3 million doses per week, while still maintaining usual dispensing and medication management services.**

Neighbourhood Pharmacies represents Canada's leading pharmacy organizations, including chain, banner, long-term care, specialty pharmacies, and grocery chains and mass merchandisers with pharmacies. Canada's 11,000 community pharmacies, employing over 35,000 pharmacy professionals across the country are ready to play their part in delivering COVID-19 vaccines to millions of Canadians, alongside other health providers. As Canada embarks on the largest and most complex vaccination campaign in history, it must ensure that there are enough trained immunizers to equitably and easily meet the needs of 37 million Canadians in urban, suburban, rural, remote, and isolated communities.

We know more can be done. Pharmacy is ready and willing to take on a larger role to deliver more accessible and efficient care. This submission offers recommendations for policies and programs as the country recovers.

**Recommendations**

- 1. Engage community pharmacies in the COVID-19 vaccine distribution plans, with enough notice to allow for planning at the pharmacy level.**
- 2. Provide clear, consistent, and frequent communication to healthcare providers and to the public regarding patient prioritization, and timing and execution of administration plans.**
- 3. Include and leverage the community pharmacy sector at the planning stage of inventory allocation and reflect the growing patient demand to receive COVID-19 vaccines at community pharmacies, including the provision of critical supplies (such as syringes and needles). Allocations should be predictable enough to ensure continuity of care in multiple dose regimens without interruption.**
- 4. Include pharmacists and pharmacy staff as essential frontline healthcare workers before the launch of any broader vaccination campaign in pharmacies.**
- 5. Promote the sophisticated and reliable existing pharmaceutical distribution system, which has shown to be rapid, responsive, and efficient in provinces where it is employed, and has shown to significantly reduce vaccine wastage.**
- 6. Support and help provinces to fund and deploy COVID-19 rapid tests through pharmacies in a safe and efficient manner.**
- 7. Ensure universal access to drug coverage that helps those who need it most, keeps costs down and doesn't disrupt existing plans.**

## Pharmacy's Support for the COVID-19 Public Health Response and Economic Reopening

Across the country, our members stand ready to leverage the infrastructure of community pharmacies to support a strong, resilient public health system. Pharmacy professionals do more than dispense prescriptions – they are integral players in primary care and public and population health.

- The sophisticated and highly reliable pharmaceutical distribution system, which supports equitable access for communities across Canada, is proven to reduce wastage and able to respond quickly to changes in demand and supply.
- Pharmacies have already invested in the infrastructure and procedures necessary to administer vaccines safely during the COVID-19 pandemic through their participation in annual influenza vaccine and other vaccine campaigns.
- Pharmacists have established experience in administering multi-dose regimens and have been shown to increase immunization rates and adherence to other multi-dose regimens.
- Pharmacies have the digital infrastructure necessary to support patient prioritization guidelines and sequencing, the storage and handling infrastructure to meet cold chain requirements, and the ability to collect and transmit data to and from provincial registries.

### Vaccines

Pharmacists are already significant and direct contributors to vaccine-related public health programs for influenza and infectious disease. Last year alone, community pharmacists provided over 35 per cent of all influenza vaccinations in Canada. Their accessibility and longitudinal relationships with patients allow pharmacists 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 and know that pharmacists can further support public health initiatives with other vaccines.

As COVID-19 vaccines become more widely available, public health and primary care capacity will be challenged to provide widespread immunization, and community pharmacy is poised to help. COVID-19 vaccine administration through community pharmacy could offer 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 administered per region to identify immunization rates and behaviour patterns. This information can be integrated with other public health data, both provincially and federally, to contribute to overall analysis and modelling.

Enlisting the support of pharmacies in vaccine distribution and administration can also help mitigate pressures on the public health, primary care and hospital systems as we prepare for a third wave. By alleviating strains to the healthcare system, public health units can continue doing what they have done so well: prioritizing patients and ensuring vulnerable populations receive care.

Involving the pharmaceutical supply chain in vaccine distribution would expedite and improve the efficiency of the overall process, and create capacity within public health. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that pharmaceutical distribution of vaccines leads to a significant reduction in waste.

## Testing

Widespread testing, screening and contact tracing will be vital to ensure the successful reopening of economies across Canada while the pandemic runs its course. Our community pharmacies are the health system's most accessible touchpoint for millions of Canadians. We believe the capacity accessibility and large national footprint pharmacy delivers can readily be harnessed to expand testing and screening capacity as we move toward the recovery phase – both for active COVID-19 testing and serology testing.

Community pharmacy represents an opportunity to support broad COVID-19 diagnostic testing and screening as well as a future serologic testing, particularly as point of care rapid antigen tests (either self-administered or administered by a healthcare provider) become more widely available in Canada. Pharmacists and their teams in Europe, South Africa, the United States, Ontario and Alberta are now successfully administering COVID-19 tests, and other provinces in Canada are investigating similar opportunities. We applaud the federal government for their continued commitment to evidence informed policy through the work of the COVID-19 testing and screening expert advisory panel which is helping to inform and build congruence in provincial guidance. In alignment with this evidence base, we believe that pharmacies are uniquely positioned to support in the broad administration of asymptomatic COVID-19 testing and screening, to keep Canadians safe as the economy continues to re-open. To that extent, we ask for the federal government's support to help provinces fund, procure and deploy more widespread use of rapid antigen tests and additional testing programs throughout the province including community pharmacy to continue to reduce transmission in the communities across the country. Finally, we implore the government to support a regulatory process to expedite the approval of safe, effective and minimally invasive rapid antigen tests including broader approval of nasal anterior swab tests and saliva based testing to encourage more voluntary uptake of these tests by Canadians.

Pharmacies already have data systems recording all claims processed in the pharmacy. Currently, all drug claims are captured through these systems. Should claims for vaccines and testing be processed through these systems – as is done for the influenza vaccine in most provinces – this data would be easily captured in the same manner and would be readily available to the provincial ministries. The data can in turn be shared with the federal government. This digital infrastructure could be leveraged to track testing, test results, and vaccination records, which would be of great value as Canada makes its way through the COVID-19 recovery phase. This also represents a first step in the further integration of this digital infrastructure with the primary care and public health network to leverage these important community resources.

Detecting, testing and responding to infectious disease is the primary tenet of public health. Community pharmacies can assist public health efforts in this area and specifically as part of the COVID-19 response. We believe that we can be an integral part of the solution to support extensive testing in the community, implement and enhance widespread vaccination to increase vaccine uptake, educate patients and enable effective data tracking and analysis.

Neighbourhood Pharmacies knows that the availability and administration of COVID-19 vaccines is crucial to ending the pandemic. Capitalizing on the high degree of accessibility of pharmacies coupled with the trust and comfort Canadians have for pharmacist-administered immunization, pharmacies can help ensure the greatest number of Canadians can be vaccinated as quickly as possible.

## Pharmacare

As pharmacists, we know the importance of ensuring that our patients have access to the medication they need without financial barriers. Whether through public or private prescription drug plans, all Canadians should have access to drug coverage. All providers — government, pharmacy, insurers and employers — have a role to play in ensuring medication access for everyone.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown Canadians that there are many gaps that exist in our healthcare system. Since March 2020, governments across Canada have had to work rapidly to close these gaps and implement solutions. While the strains that this pandemic has placed on our healthcare system have been unparalleled, Canadians' access to prescription drugs has remained almost untouched. According to a Pollara Strategic Insights survey conducted in November 2020, some 32.5-35 million Canadians already have prescription drug coverage, either through public or private plans or a combination of both. Eighty per cent of Canadians surveyed indicated that they are satisfied with their drug coverage and 75 per cent do not want to see their benefits replaced. A National Pharmacare program must address the uninsured segment of the population, and provide support for those whose coverage does not provide sufficient coverage for their medication needs.

Every Canadian should have access to drug coverage, through a program that helps those who need it most, keeps costs down and doesn't disrupt existing plans. A universal pharmacare program must also include investment in a rare disease strategy and special consideration of the domestic life sciences sector.