

# Briefing

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## Healthcare in Canada – a system in need for reform

*Franziska Schwarzmann*

The state-funded healthcare system in Canada promises good care to all residents, an institution of which Canada is very proud. These days, all we seem to read are negative headlines. 6 million Canadians don't have access to a family doctor, emergency medicine is overwhelmed, and the wait time for neurological procedures is a year. The system no longer delivers on its promises. Has the idea of socialized medical care failed?

### Primary Care Crisis

When you're sick in Canada and want to see a doctor fairly quickly, there's only one option: line up early at a walk-in clinic, a practice without

appointments, and hope to be seen as a patient. The average wait time in such clinics in North Vancouver is 3 hours, averaging at just over an hour across Canada. Urgent care clinics are so overcrowded because 6.5 million Canadians don't

have a family doctor. And those who do have one can only schedule appointments with such long wait times that they also end up going to a walk-in clinic for a simple cold or a stubbed toe.

General practice isn't attractive in Canada, says an intensive care doctor from Vancouver. After years as a general practitioner, she opted for further training in emergency medicine. Many family doctors today are changing specialties, while others retire, closing their practices without successors. Only in the past three months, this led to more than 7,000 people suddenly losing their family doctors in Ontario.

In a press briefing held in February 2024, representatives of the Ontario Medical Association outlined the challenges of sustainably running a family practice. Disproportionate administrative burden, physician fees not adjusted for inflation, and increasing practice costs are just some of the problems. Much more serious was the demoralization of doctors when referrals are not processed quickly enough, and they have to explain to utterly desperate patients why, even after several months of waiting, they still do not have access to specialists.

## **Crowded Emergency Rooms with Long Wait Times**

The lack of access to family doctors has consequences: millions of Canadians not receive preventive screenings for diabetes or cancer. Additionally, emergency rooms are full. In December 2023 patients in Ontario waited up to 22 hours before being admitted to the hospital. Health policy expert and physician Dr. Shawn Whatley talks about deadly wait times in his book "No More Lethal Waits." Many practicing physicians publicly express their fears that these wait times are costing lives.

In Canada, patients are categorized based on the CTAS score, the Canadian Triage and Acuity Score. Patients with scores of 1 or 2 have obviously life-threatening symptoms. According to the Vancouver doctor's assessment, these patients are treated promptly. The situation is not as straight forward for patients with ambiguous symptoms, scoring 3 according to the triage model. These patients may have to wait very long, but would need help more quickly. She concludes that it is mainly the primary care crisis that is driving patients to emergency rooms.

## **Staff Shortages**

The shortage of personnel in medical care is glaring: by 2028, an estimated 44,000 professionals will be lacking, of which 30,000 are general practitioners. This is not for a lack of doctors in the country: an estimated 13,000 doctors live in Canada unable to practice because they haven't completed a 2-year residency – a requirement for a license to practice. The provinces mainly fill the limited residency positions with graduates from Canadian universities.

Many Canadians study abroad and find no position for a residency upon their return. Over the past 10 years, the population has grown by 5 million, but the provinces have only created 167 more residency positions. Many immigrants who received visas based on their medical education in their home country are also waiting for a license. Doctors without a North American education or work experience verify their degree and secure a license from the Medical Council of Canada before they are permitted to undertake one year of postgraduate training or active medical practice. For foreign specialists, even if they already have decades of experience in other countries and speak English, the path to practice might be longer.

## **Universal, Barrier-Free Healthcare**

The Canadian healthcare system is based on the principle of social healthcare, which aims to grant

every citizen access to medical services. The importance of this concept to Canadians is evident in their choice of Tommy Douglas, the father of the system, as the "Greatest Ever Canadian" in 2004. Administratively, healthcare policy lies with the provinces, so there are 13 different provincial health insurance systems.

### Federal Spending Power

The government in Ottawa incentivized the provinces to invest in the healthcare system from 1960 onwards. The state contributed one dollar for every dollar spent by the provinces to the expansion of hospitals and the scope of medical care. After the cessation of these federal funds in 1977, the provinces could only finance the system with additional fees for services. With the Canada Healthcare Act, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau established the public administration of health based on nationally applicable principles and promised federal payments to prevent additional fees.

Presently, certain services are excluded from universal health insurance, such as dental care. Prescription glasses or drugs are also not covered by healthcare, for which Canadians are encouraged to buy private insurance. However, unlike in Germany, this private supplementary insurance cannot help to schedule a specialist appointment. Bypassing system gaps as a private payer is not possible.

### No Reform in Sight

In December 2023, the provincial government of British Columbia made headlines when it announced that cancer patients would now be treated in the USA at the province's expense. It has long been known that many Canadians seek medical services abroad because they would have to wait too long in Canada. While the provinces have been asking Ottawa for more

financial support for years, the Fraser Institute, a public policy think tank, finds that the system's issues are not only due to a lack of funding: in a comparative study among all countries with social healthcare, Canada has the highest percentage budget for healthcare spending.

While politicians propose incremental improvements, no party seems to be aiming for a holistic reform. Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's claim in a TV interview in 2022 that "there is no point putting more money into a broken system.", in February 2023 his government announced healthcare investments of \$41 billion over the next 10 years. For more than a year the federal government has been negotiating individual subsidies with the provinces. Pierre Poilievre, leader of the Conservative Party, has already promised to uphold the agreements for federal subsidies if a Conservative government took power after the elections.

Franziska Schwarzmann is a KAS scholarship Alumna and lives in Vancouver with her family. She is a writer covering public policy topics.

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## Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Auslandsbüro Kanada  
[www.kas.de/kanada](http://www.kas.de/kanada)  
[info.canada@kas.de](mailto:info.canada@kas.de)



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