Opening Statement

House of Commons
Standing Committee on Finance

Pre-Budget Consultations 2018-2019

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Check against delivery
Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about our health and health care. It’s a pivotal time for medicine in Canada, with medical innovations, new patient expectations, and emerging technologies set to revolutionize the way physicians practice and potentially transform our system.

For physicians, these changes have important implications, and raise many questions. At our Health Summit last month in Winnipeg, we talked about how we can leverage innovation to deliver care in new ways. How do we scale up virtual care? How do we address the digital divide and ensure vulnerable populations aren’t left behind?

Being able to deliver care in new, more effective and more accessible ways is even more important when we consider our current demographics. Canada has a rapidly aging population and they have very specific health care needs.

However, our current hospital-focused system wasn’t designed to respond to these types of needs, such as multiple chronic diseases, frailty, Alzheimer’s – or this level of demand. And it’s now straining under the pressure.
Much of this pressure comes down to the lack of long-term care beds and home care support. More support for caregivers is also very much needed. In many communities across the country, seniors are spending up to three years on wait lists for long-term care. And it’s often about geographic availability, especially in our Northern and rural communities. Not only are seniors in these areas waiting far too long, they’re often forced to accept placements hundreds of kilometers from their families and friends.

And as we know, while seniors wait for long-term placement and/or home care, they often have no other choice but to stay in hospital. So not only are they not getting the kind of specialized care they need, our health care dollars are not being put to the best use. That’s because hospital care is about seven times more expensive than long-term care and about twenty times more expensive than home care. It’s hard to get an accurate figure for home care, as many of the expenses are borne by family and caregivers, who often have to pay out of pocket for supplemental care.

And there are implications on the system as a whole: our resources are overstretched, wait times in the ER are increasing and surgeries and tests are being cancelled. Canadians across the board are being affected, and so it’s not surprising that their confidence in the system is divided. A recent Ipsos survey found that only half of Canadians are confident that the health care system will be able to meet the needs of seniors care.
In recent weeks and months, we’ve seen many provincial governments show clear commitment to the issue, but the reality is that their vision for better seniors care will not come to fruition unless they’re backed up by the appropriate investments.

In short, we need to adjust current funding levels so that they better match the real health care costs of today.

And while this is a national issue affecting all provinces and territories, those with the oldest populations, such as in the Atlantic provinces, are feeling the effects the hardest. We need to take population aging into account when determining funding levels, so that certain jurisdictions – and their seniors – aren’t disadvantaged.

That’s why the CMA is recommending that the federal government address the health care costs of population aging by introducing a “demographic top-up” to the Canada Health Transfer. This new funding would account for age and would provide much needed support for provinces and territories to create more long-term care beds, expand palliative and home care programs and support the development of new, more effective and accessible care for seniors.

Not only could this funding help improve care for our seniors, it could improve care for Canadians of all ages. It could alleviate the pressure on our hospitals, emergency rooms and operating theatres, and create a system of better coordinated care.
Our population is getting older and the challenges we see today are only going to get worse. But it’s not too late. We can do something about it now. As we prepare for a future of better health, we look forward to working with the new Minister of Seniors, the Minister of Innovation, the Minister of Health and many others on these and other priorities that affect seniors and all Canadians.

Thank you.