

Improving Health Care Wait Times

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Doctors of BC Position

British Columbians are experiencing prolonged wait times across the health care system. A collaborative, comprehensive, and province-wide approach is urgently needed to reduce wait times and improve access to care. Doctors of BC calls on the Ministry of Health to:

- Consult with physicians and health professions to inform effective and sustainable health workforce planning.
- Allocate funding and resources to implement the Specialist Waitlist Management Proposal, including data collection through a centralized database and waitlist management mechanisms.
- Enhance digital referral processes in collaboration with physicians and health system partners. This includes enabling real-time data exchange to support referrals, orders, and consultations.
- Improve rural access to specialty care by ensuring stabilization of core specialist services in mid-sized rural communities and supporting specialist outreach initiatives.

Background

In 2006, Doctors of BC released a policy paper, [*Waiting Too Long: Reducing and Better Managing Wait Times in BC*](#), outlining recommendations to address the province's waitlist problem. Despite efforts to improve access to care, wait times remain a significant challenge in our health care system, resulting in prolonged suffering and risks to patients. (1,2) Wait times in one area can create a domino effect, disrupting many parts of the health care system.

In 2024 and 2025, Doctors of BC and Consultant Specialists of BC conducted the Specialist Waitlist Survey to understand health care wait times and the associated challenges physicians face. The results reveal how rising demands for care and health system challenges, including a lack of system supports to manage increasing waitlists, are

negatively impacting patients and contributing to physician moral distress and burnout. (3)

Data-driven, evidence-based solutions, created with input from physicians and other health professionals, are needed to make sustainable improvements in wait times, reduce costs, and improve patient outcomes.

Analysis

Health workforce shortages significantly impact access to care and are a leading contributor to long wait times. These shortages result in overworked health care professionals, impact care quality, limit hospital capacity, and increase hospital overcrowding. (4) (5)

Sustainable health workforce planning strategies need to include input from physicians and front-line health care workers who understand on-the-ground challenges and needs. Alongside efforts to address

health workforce challenges, targeted solutions are needed to reduce specialist waitlists and improve referral-consultation processes to reduce wait times.

Doctors of BC urges the Ministry of Health to support and fund the Specialist Waitlist Management Proposal. (6) Developed over a two-year collaborative process among Consultant Specialists of BC, Doctors of BC, and the Ministry of Health, and informed by significant engagement with specialists, the Proposal outlines the need for improved data collection and waitlist management tools.

Supporting Waitlist Management

Improving wait times begins with accurate, standardized, and transparent data measurement. Variations in data collection prevent physicians and health professionals from making data-informed decisions and restrict standardization in the definition and reporting of wait time data across BC. This makes it challenging to compare and effectively use the data at a system level.

A province-wide Specialist Waitlist Database can provide physicians, administrators, and the government with a clear and accurate understanding of practice demographics, current waitlist size, and wait times. Accurate, real-time data can assist in directing patient referrals and guide specialist workforce and infrastructure investment decisions. (6)

In addition to a provincial database, waitlist management supports can increase efficiency of the consultation-referral process and improve specialist wait times and patient experiences. Remunerating specialists to integrate waitlist management into their clinical workflow can support them to allocate the time necessary to review new referrals,

triage, and optimize their waitlists.

Additionally, to support communication between specialists and family physicians and improve patient access to care, the Proposal calls for the creation of a new written advice billing code. This code will allow specialists to offer immediate support to referring clinicians for patients who do not require a formal consultation. (6)

Supporting physicians to implement comprehensive triaging and provide written advice can help decrease the growth rate of waitlists and enhance the consultation-referral process. Together, these efforts can reduce wait times for patients and address challenges experienced by specialists and family physicians.

Improving the Digital Referral Process

There are additional opportunities to optimize referral processes, including exploring options such as digital single-entry referral models, where clinically appropriate and preferred. This model groups patients referred to specific specialists within a jurisdiction into a single queue, ensuring that each patient sees the first available specialist. (7) While this system may impact patient and referring clinician choice, this model could prevent duplicative referrals, reduce cancelled appointments, and shorten the wait from the initial consult to the specialist visit. (7) This model can also help mitigate the challenges physicians have with navigating multiple referral systems.

To enhance digital referrals, orders, and consultations and provide system-wide visibility into wait times, Doctors of BC supports solutions that enable real-time data exchange. To be effective, this should be

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interoperable, clinician-centred, align with national standards, and integrate with EMRs.

Improving Rural Access to Specialty Care

Rural and remote communities in BC face significant barriers to accessing health care services. Collaborating with rural communities and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples is vital to improving wait times and access to care, as they experience disproportionate impacts due to the unequal geographic distribution of specialists and health care staff. Improving recruitment and retention of specialists in rural communities, along with supporting participation in regional referral centres and outreach programs, will help stabilize regional health care systems and ensure that rural communities receive timely access to care.

Additionally, conducting province-wide needs assessments for specialty care, supporting family physicians in developing advanced skills, and structuring compensation that reflects the expanded scopes of practice for generalists and specialists can improve wait times and access to care for rural communities.

Conclusion

BC's health care system is overstretched and cannot be improved without significant financial investments and collaboration between health system partners. As an immediate step, implementing the Specialist Waitlist Management Proposal will go a long way toward reducing wait times for access to specialists in BC. Additionally, a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of BC's health care system is essential to accurately track wait time progress and design a system that meets the needs of British Columbians.

References

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History

This policy builds on our 2006 policy paper *Waiting Too Long: Reducing and Better Managing Wait Times in BC* and 2012 policy statement *Wait Times and Patient Guarantees*.

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