

Health Care

The pandemic has proven the critical importance of a strong public health care system. It has also exposed some structural issues in the system. Advocates have long been calling for increased federal investment in public health care and for an expansion of our system beyond doctors and hospitals.

The federal government's direct contribution to Medicare is expected to be only 18% by 2024. The original agreement was for 50% federal funding. With the last Health Accord, the federal government increased its rate of contribution by 6% per year, but the current increase is lower and is not keeping pace with health care costs. Provinces did not always use those extra federal contributions for health care, so the health care system continued to suffer. Before the election, the provinces called for an extra \$28 billion annually to be transferred by the federal government, "no strings attached."

Liberal

The Liberal Party has promised \$10 billion in new funding for the 2021/22 fiscal year. \$6 billion is slated to address the surgical backlogs created by the pandemic. There is also \$3.2 billion for the provinces and territories to hire 7,500 doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses. \$240.5 million will go to increasing access to virtual care.

The Liberals have also committed to \$5 billion over 5 years to the provinces and territories for mental health services. There is a pledge to expand access to virtual care, in general. The Liberals retain their commitment to moving forward on national, universal pharmacare, but there are no details or promises of extra funds to launch a national program. They do, however, point to their agreement with PEI (\$35 million over 4 years) to expand the province's drug formulary and lower co-payment costs.

The Liberals commit to strengthening federal powers under the *Canada Health Act* to deduct health transfers from provinces that allow extra billing. They also plan to invest heavily in recruiting in LTC to hire 50,000 new workers, and they promise \$9 billion over 5 years to improve wages.

Conservative

The Conservatives' key pledge, and almost their only statement on health care, is to increase the rate of growth of the Canada Health Transfer to 6% from the current rate, which is tied to the GDP, with a minimum of 3%. They say this will be an increase of \$60 billion in transfers over the next 10 years but the parliamentary budget officer points out that there would be no increase for 2021-22 and the total in the next mandate would be \$3.6 billion, far short of the commitment from other parties. This increased funding is being provided with "no strings attached." There are no dedicated funds to mental health with only a request that provinces earmark a portion for mental health initiatives.

The Conservatives are silent on pharmacare, dental care, and other expansions of public health care. Instead, they have said that they welcome "innovation" and the increased involvement of the private sector in health care. This is a stance that

concerns defenders of public health care, as *experimentation* and *innovation* are often code words for increased privatization and the introduction of more 2-tier health care.

NDP

The NDP has the most expansive vision for public health care among all federal political parties. They promise universal pharmacare and to invest \$10 billion annually. They also promise that universal dental care and optometry will be brought under our public health care system for Canadians who do not have private insurance. As well, the NDP is proposing to fund mental health care for all uninsured Canadians.

On LTC reform, the NDP would introduce minimum standards, and they have called for LTC to be brought under the *Canada Health Act*. They also commit to ending for-profit LTC, starting with the federally owned LTC company Revera. Also, the NDP promise minimum standards for home care.

The NDP will also tackle wait times, develop a public system for virtual health care, and recruit and retain needed health professionals.

The NDP has not committed to increasing the rate of the Canada Health Transfer, but their promises amount to a very significant increase in federal health care spending.

Green

The Green Party supports expanding Medicare to include universal pharmacare, free basic dental care, and enhanced mental health services. The Green Party also wants to boost funding for mental health services to establish a National Mental Health Strategy. The party also wants to expand telemedicine.

The Green Party would bring LTC under the *Canada Health Act*, create enforceable national standards, and bring in measures to support LTC workers. They also want LTC to be publicly funded or not-for-profit.

Conclusion

A large range of issues are covered under health care, and this note seeks to provide a synopsis of the larger commitments.

Health care continues to be the number one priority for Canadians, and the pandemic has served to highlight the importance of a strong public health care system. The stress on the system, however, is leading some governments to look at turning to private for-profit solutions to the current crisis. The landmark ruling in BC on the constitutional challenge brought forward by advocates of more private for-profit delivery was unequivocal in its rejection of this model. Private for-profit health care will not improve our system, it will only allow queue-jumping by those who can pay, undermining our model of care based on need, not on ability to pay.

