



Sustaining Health Care Requires Addressing Shortages in Health Science Professions

Shortages of skilled professionals have brought our health care system to the brink. Just as we invest to rebuild highways washed out by catastrophic flooding, we must invest to save our health care system.

That starts with investing in the people who deliver the care.

For years, British Columbia's health care system has struggled with shortages of health science professionals in the public sector. Jobs in the health science professions are critical to the success of our public health care system, with over 70 specialized professions – from prevention to diagnosis to treatment and rehabilitation – ensuring robust and reliable care for patients across British Columbia.

The specific reasons for shortages in these professions vary, but generally arise from recruitment and retention challenges ignored for more than a decade including: lack of provincial post-secondary training capacity, competition with the private sector, heavy workload, and professional burnout. It will come as no surprise that these challenges have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shortages are widespread, create delays for patients, and increase workload and burnout for specialized health professionals

- The private sector is luring away physiotherapists and other professionals with higher wages and more manageable caseloads.
- Because of unfilled vacancies and low staffing levels, many departments rely on overtime to deliver necessary services.
- One respiratory therapy department in an acute care hospital can only manage demand using upwards of 1,800 to 2,000 hours of overtime each month; that department has vacancies that have remained unfilled for more than a year.
- A 2021 survey of HSA members revealed concerning indicators of the impact of shortages:
 - 76% reported shortages in their profession;
 - 57% said their department already has a patient waitlist; and
 - 82% are worried about patient care due to workload.
- 41% said they are considering leaving public practice due to unmanageable workload.

Addressing health science professions require recruitment incentives and retention initiatives

- In the short- to medium-term we urge the government to consider a range of recruitment and retention strategies to address this crisis. These include:
 - signing bonuses to recruit professionals currently not practicing in the public system or from other jurisdictions;
 - student loan forgiveness for new graduates who commit to working in public health;
 - travel and relocation expense reimbursements (as many vacancies are in rural and remote communities); and
 - housing stipends.

Addressing health science profession shortages also requires competitive wages

- It is also important to recognise that BC lags behind other provinces when it comes to wages for health science professionals. BC is often in the middle or at the bottom of the pack in terms of compensation, especially compared with neighbouring Alberta.
- We also know that while many young professionals may train in BC, they quickly relocate to other provinces due to the lower cost of living and higher pay.
- We encourage government to consider targeted labour market adjustments for priority professions to ensure BC is competitive and able to attract needed health science professionals.

Recommendations

- New investment in recruitment and retention measures to address the public-sector shortage of health science professionals, including:
 - competitive wages with other provinces and the private sector;
 - more clinical leadership opportunities; and
 - incentives to attract graduates and those in private practice into public practice.
- Continue investments to increase Ministry of Advanced Education funding to train more health science professionals who face public-sector shortages, including: physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, diagnostic medical sonographers, MRI technologists, medical laboratory technologists, respiratory therapists, anesthesia assistants, and perfusionists. Government has made important steps with increasing training seats for these professions, but current and future demand far outpaces these additions.