

# Address the shortage of Health Science Professionals in public health care

For years, British Columbia has struggled with shortages of Health Science Professionals in the public sector, including (but not limited to) rehab therapists, diagnostic medical sonographers, medical laboratory technologists, and medical imaging technologists. The specific reasons for these shortages vary by profession, but generally arise from recruitment and retention challenges, including lack of provincial post-secondary training capacity, competition with the private sector, heavy workload, and professional burnout.

## **Health Science Professionals represent the majority of shortage professions in health care**

The BC Ministry of Health's Provincial Health Workforce Strategy 2018/19 – 2020/21 indicates that the majority of current and future priority professions with labour market challenges are health science professions. These professions are critical to the success of our public health care system, and ensuring robust and reliable care for patients across British Columbia.

Because of unfilled vacancies and low staffing levels, many departments rely on overtime to deliver necessary services. One therapy department in an acute care hospital, for example, can only manage demand using upwards of *1,800 to 2,000 hours of overtime each month* – and yet that department has vacancies that have remained unfilled for a year. This is not a sustainable strategy in the immediate, medium, or long term – either economically or in terms of human resources. It is expensive and causes burnout of the limited professionals we have.

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, Budget 2021 consultation report commented on the challenge facing our health care system stemming from the shortage of professionals. Recommendation 72 from their report states: *“Provide targeted, increased funding for training health care professionals in areas facing shortages with a focus on expanding capacity and resources within existing programs in smaller communities and ensuring opportunities for British Columbians in rural, remote and Indigenous communities to train locally.”*

Strategic Priority Areas	Priority Professions for 2018/2019	Future Priority Professions
<i>I. Primary Care Services</i>	Nurse Practitioner	Registered Nurse
	Family Physician	Psychologist
	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	Social Worker
	Occupational Therapist (OT)	
	Physiotherapist	
<i>II. Adults with Complex Medical Conditions and/or Frailty</i>	Health Care Assistant (HCA)	Registered Nurse
	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	Rehabilitation Assistant
	Occupational Therapist (OT)	Dietitian
	Physiotherapist	Social Worker
		Medical Specialist
<i>III. Surgical and Diagnostic Services</i>	Nurse (LPN and RN)	Anesthesiologist and GP Anesthesiologist
	Nurse Practitioner	Anesthesia Assistant
	Physiotherapist	Case Manager
	Perfusionist	Surgeon & GP with enhanced surgical skills
		Dietitian
		Counsellor
		Home Nursing Support
		Surgical Services Team
		Clinical Surgical Subspecialists
<i>IV. Mental Health and Substance Use</i>	Psychiatrist	Psychologist
	Registered Psychiatric Nurse	Social Worker
	Occupational Therapist (OT)	Clinical Counsellor
	Family Physician	Trained Peer Support
	Nurse Practitioner	Pharmacist
	Physiotherapist	Dietitian
		Naturopathic Medicine
		Recreation Therapist
		Music and Art Therapists
		Spiritual Services
		Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncturist
		Cross-Cultural Liaison
		Vocational Expert
		Expert in Public Health
		Expert in Psychosocial Rehabilitation

## **Heavy workloads causing professionals to leave the public system, making shortages worse**

The current shortages in these fields are already taking a toll. In a recent survey of HSA members, 65% reported shortages in their professions, and 53% said their department already has a patient waitlist. Most concerning, over 42% said they are considering leaving public practice due to unmanageable workload.

If our public health care system is to be successful in fighting COVID-19 and working down the surgical and diagnostic backlog, it will depend on immediate action to address these professional shortages.

## **Recent government action is welcome, and much more is needed**

In 2019 the BC government committed to workforce planning with the creation of the new Director of Allied Health Workforce Development role in the Ministry of Health.

Further, over the last three years, the BC government has taken encouraging steps towards growing training opportunities for health science professionals, including 40 new first-year physiotherapy and 24 occupational therapy training seats across the province;<sup>1</sup> and new diagnostic medical sonography training programs at College of New Caledonia in Prince George and at Camosun College on Vancouver Island.<sup>2</sup>

These are important steps forward, but now is the time for bold action to address the critical shortages. We need to increase training seats, especially outside the Lower Mainland, for those professions experiencing shortages and develop incentives for graduates to bring their skills into the public health sector.

## **Responding to COVID-19 and the surgery backlog requires investment in Health Science Professionals**

COVID-19 has created the largest surgery and diagnostic testing backlog in BC history. As BC resumes scheduled procedures with an ambitious plan to ramp up public sector volumes of diagnostic testing and surgeries,<sup>3</sup> it will be critical that our public system has the health science professionals in place necessary to support patients through each step of the pre-and-post surgical needs. It is not just doctors and nurses who support patients, but the whole team of health care professionals.

Jobs in the health science professions are key to our economic recovery. Investing in the health care and social services workforce makes solid economic sense. These are good jobs that support families and communities. And, most importantly, they serve an urgent need in our province as we manage through a global pandemic.

## Recommendations

- 1. Implement targeted recruitment and retention measures to address the public-sector shortage of health science professionals, including more clinical leadership opportunities, increased post-secondary training opportunities, and incentives to attract recent graduates and professionals working in private practice into public practice.**
- 2. Continue to expand and support the activities of the Director of Allied Health Workforce Development in the Ministry of Health.**
- 3. Increase Ministry of Advanced Education funding to train more health science professionals that face public-sector shortages.**

1. Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, Occupational and physical therapy seats coming to Northern BC, May 24, 2019. There are currently 80 first-year physiotherapy seats in BC. This will increase to 120 first-year spaces, with full expansion expected by September 2022. The First 20 seats will be at UBC Vancouver, followed by Fraser Valley. The most recent increase was in 2008. In occupational therapy, there are 48 first-year seats in BC. This will increase to 72 first-year seats with the first eight at UBC Vancouver (Sep. 2020) and 16 through a joint UBC/UNBC initiative (Sep. 2022). The most-recent increase was in 2009.

2. Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, Northern B.C.'s First Sonography Program Gets Underway, Jan. 28, 2019; Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, First sonography program coming to Vancouver Island, October 17, 2019.

3. Ministry of Health, Province launches renewal plan for surgeries, May 7, 2020.