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Without health workers, there is no health care: Health care leaders call for urgent action at emergency COVID-19 summit

Ottawa – Oct. 6, 2021 – In many parts of Canada, hospitals are overwhelmed, vaccine rates are at a standstill and public health measures are being reinstated to contain rising COVID-19 cases. Amid a growing fourth wave, health care workers are burnt out, demoralized and exhausted as they care for patients. In addition, many Canadians are waiting for much-needed procedures that have been delayed due to increasing backlogs.

On Tuesday evening, in response to this state of crisis, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) hosted an emergency summit. It brought together nearly 40 national and provincial health organizations, and included nurses, physicians, personal support workers, psychologists, educational institutions, and other health organizations.

During the meeting, health care leaders identified both short-term and long-term actions to contain the fourth wave, lead an effective COVID-19 response and ensure Canada's health system remains sustainable. These include:

1. Taking decisive urgent and long-term actions to address staff shortages across Canada, examining issues including recruitment, retention, workload and safety, and bring immediate relief to workers in COVID-19 hot zones.
2. Making immediate commitments at all levels of governments — including municipal, provincial, territorial and federal — to avoid the collapse of the health systems at all costs by implementing stronger public health measures and empowering authorities such as school boards to intervene and protect the people they serve.
3. Providing urgent and long-term mental health support for health workers who continue to work in dire conditions to care for patients and keep the health system afloat.

“Health workers across the country are past the point of exhaustion and they need to feel like there is a light at the end of this endless tunnel. We need to aggressively work to implement public health measures — even those unpopular ones — to regain control. We can no longer ask our health workers to carry the load.” — Dr. Katharine Smart, CMA president

“Throughout the summit we heard common concerns and themes being shared on how to immediately support health workers in this crisis. It is clear, that we need a multi-pronged intervention, one that addresses the critical short-term challenges and one that also looks at beyond the COVID-19 crisis. While improved data collection and national health human resource frameworks are necessary, they do not fix the immediate issues. For our health system to make it through the fourth wave, governments and health organizations need to urgently work together to support our health workers. Without health workers, there is no health care.” — Tim Guest, CNA president

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About the CMA

The Canadian Medical Association is the national voice of the medical profession. Our focus is on creating strong and accessible health systems, fostering well-being and diversity in medical culture, and ensuring every person in Canada has equal opportunity to be healthy. In partnership with physicians, medical learners, patients and others, we advance these goals through advocacy, knowledge sharing and granting.

About the CNA

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) is the national and global professional voice of Canadian nursing. We represent registered nurses, nurse practitioners, licensed and registered practical nurses, registered psychiatric nurses and retired nurses across all 13 provinces and territories.

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