

Anticipatory Questions for Parliamentary Committee Appearances, Minister of Health, OGGO May 2020

PPE

Q1: What actions has the Government of Canada taken to ensure that front-line health care workers receive the personal protective equipment they need?

To increase Canada's collective buying power, the Public Health Agency of Canada is collaborating with provinces and territories to procure PPE and other medical supplies in bulk.

Moreover, the Government of Canada has galvanized the Canadian industry to produce PPE and other medical supplies domestically.

These efforts are further supported with expedited regulatory approvals facilitated by Health Canada; and large-scale logistical expertise from the Canadian Armed Forces.

All PPE and other medical supplies received by the Public Health Agency of Canada undergoes a quality verification process prior to distribution to provinces and territories. Supplies that do not meet the Government of Canada's technical specifications for healthcare settings for COVID-19 are assessed for potential use in non-healthcare settings.

The results of these actions are showing promise. As of May 18, the Public Health Agency of Canada has allocated over 2 million N95 respirators and equivalents (e.g., KN95), 30 million surgical masks, 11 million pairs of nitrile gloves, and 4 million face shields. This is in addition to responding to over 50 requests for assistance from provinces and territories to the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile.

Borders

Q2: What actions has the Government of Canada taken to minimize the risk of importation of COVID-19 from travellers entering Canada from other countries, including essential workers from the United States?

To protect the health and safety of Canadians, we have taken unprecedented action to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 17th, the Government used its authorities under the *Quarantine Act* to put in place a prohibition on foreign nationals entering Canada. On March 20th, land borders were closed to all but essential workers. And on March 25th, the Government put in place a requirement, that all persons entering Canada, whether by air, sea or land, unless they provided an essential service, are required to quarantine for 14 days.

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Any traveller arriving in Canada is now required to wear a non-medical mask or face covering upon entry, and while in transit to their place of isolation or quarantine.

We verify compliance with the mandatory isolation order by phone and in person. Canadian law enforcement now has the authority to issue tickets to those who are found in contravention of the mandatory isolation order.

While those who must enter Canada regularly to ensure the flow of goods and essential services are exempt from the quarantine requirements, they must not have any symptoms of COVID-19 when they cross the border, and are encouraged to wear an appropriate non-medical mask or face covering when in public places, and when physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Testing

Q3: How is the Government of Canada collaborating with provinces and territories in their efforts to get more Canadians tested for COVID-19?

The Government of Canada is supporting provincial and territorial governments on many fronts to increase testing and support rapid contact tracing to stop the spread of COVID-19. We are filling gaps in real-time as we work to put in place made-in-Canada solutions for the long-term.

By closely collaborating with provincial public health laboratories, we are responding to their real-time requests for assistance, as they encounter often unpredictable challenges. For example, we supplied 1000 point of care tests to Saskatchewan on May12th in response to an outbreak. On May15th, we provided supplies to Quebec to address a gap in their high throughput molecular testing.

Throughout the pandemic, we are increasing provincial laboratory testing supplies by bulk procurement of swabs and testing reagents. We have developed a reagent at the National Microbiology Laboratory and contracted with a New Brunswick company (LuminUltra) to produce the reagent in large quantities for the provinces. Every week, LuminUltra ships reagent for 500,000 tests to laboratories across the country. The National Research Council is also producing reagent to support a specific testing platform used in Ontario and Quebec. Completion of this product, expected by the end of June, will fill another gap in testing supply. Scale up of these production capacities is being considered going forward.

Supplying swabs for taking patient samples for testing has also been affected by global shortages. Aggressive bulk procurement, along with supporting made-in-Canada solutions to swab manufacturing, are designed to fill this gap. We have ordered 12.1

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million swabs and are distributing approximately 700,000 weekly to provinces and territories.

Federal innovation programs are supporting Canadian industries in producing swabs and test kits to support ramp up of testing. Through these programs, we are building sustained capacity to meet Canada's testing requirements.

As Canada's regulatory authority for medical devices, Health Canada (under an interim order issued by the Minister of Health on March 18th) has expedited its review of submissions for medical devices used for COVID-19 while ensuring safety and effectiveness.

The National Microbiology Laboratory is working with provincial laboratories to validate new point-of-care tests. These rapid tests, designed for low volume testing, are well-suited for northern and remote communities where transport of patient samples to laboratories in urban centres can mean significant delays in receiving test results.

Finally, serological testing using blood samples rather than the nasal samples required for current tests, will offer even greater ease of testing. These tests detect antibodies to the COVID-19 virus and indicate previous infection. They are not used to make a diagnosis of COVID-19 disease but their value will increase as we learn more about immunity to the virus after infection and recovery. The Government of Canada launched the COVID-19 Immunity Task Force on April 23rd to conduct studies, using serological tests, of how widespread exposure to the virus has been in Canada. Results will support planning vaccination programs and targeting public health measures in provinces and territories.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

Q4: What is the Government of Canada doing ensure that Canadians have access to a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible?

While no vaccine currently exists for COVID-19, there are currently several candidate vaccines in research and development. At this time, it is not possible to determine which one(s) will be successful in preventing COVID-19 infection. As such, the Government of Canada is supporting multiple organizations who are working at unprecedented speed to develop candidate vaccines.

The Government's support for vaccine research and development, bio-manufacturing requirements to support large-scale production, enhancing capacity and access for clinical trials, and seeking solutions for domestic capacity will all help to better position Canada to rapidly access a vaccine once it does become available.

The Government of Canada is closely monitoring the vaccine development pipeline, both domestically and internationally, and will work quickly to negotiate purchase

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agreements with vaccine manufacturer(s) to secure supply for all Canadians as soon as it is feasible.

Unintended Health Consequences Of Public Health Restrictions

Q5: What is the Government of Canada doing to address the unintended broader impacts of the pandemic and related physical distancing restrictions on Canadians, such as lack of activity, increased domestic violence, and mental health?

We must continue to bear in mind both the direct and indirect impacts this virus is having on our collective mental and physical health. Generating the evidence is a necessary first step for developing effective policies, programs and other prevention or mitigation measures. The Public Health Agency of Canada is working with data partners (Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information) to identify what data/analyses can be shared, collected or produced quickly, in order to guide public health action in the near-term and beyond. While data is still emerging on the ways that Canadians' behaviours may have changed as a result of COVID-19 social isolation measures, it is clear the short and long term impacts will likely differ among populations, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

As a first step, the government's recent investment of \$240.5 million in mental health resources will help Canadians access reliable health information and support access to health services through virtual tools and approaches. This funding will further enable the development and reach of:

- The Canada-COVID-19 mobile app, which provides Canadians with access to a symptom tracker, credible sources of information and resources, and a self-assessment tool;
- The Wellness Together Canada portal, which makes it easy for Canadians to access self-directed tools and find credible information on mental health and substance use. It also connects Canadians to peer support workers, social workers, psychologists and other professionals for confidential chat sessions, phone calls and online counselling, which can be used to help Canadians work through the grief they may be experiencing at the loss of a loved one; and
- Enhanced analytics capacity, which will help gain further insights and understanding into the emergence, spread and public health risks of COVID-19. Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada have put in place contracts with BlueDot Inc. to enhance and expand upon existing expertise in this field.

Health Canada is also currently funding a project (\$2 million / 2 years) with the Canadian Virtual Hospice (CVH) to expand the existing CVH web-based offerings and develop new resources and services to meet the needs of underserved communities including Francophones across Canada, the LGBTQ2 community, and families caring

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for a dying child. Health Canada is exploring ways to support a variety of populations in the deployment of virtual health services. Discussions are ongoing with provincial and territorial partners on the implementation of these tools.

Recognizing the importance of the role of social determinants on health, the Government of Canada has made a series of investments to address impacts of the pandemic, including:

- \$50M million for Women's Shelters and Sexual Assault Centres;
- \$350 million for the Emergency Community Support Fund to support vulnerable Canadians through charities and non-profit organizations that deliver essential services;
- \$7.5 million for Kids Help Phone to support counselling services for children and youth;
- Income support initiatives including the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit; and
- Additional funding to support people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness.

We have also been working with our partners to shift healthy living programs to virtual interventions and adjusting content to reflect the COVID-19 context. Funded projects have started introducing videos and other digital content (e.g. on exercising at home, cooking meals and coping with stress) featuring health professionals, such as nutritionists or counsellors, to continue to engage with individuals, families, workplaces and communities.

Collaboration with Provinces and Territories

Q6: How is the Government of Canada working with provinces and territories to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Government of Canada continues to work collaboratively with partners at all levels of government to respond to COVID-19.

The Special Advisory Committee (SAC), composed of the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health and senior public health officials from all jurisdictions, has been activated since January 2020 meeting frequently to coordinate federal, provincial and territorial response efforts across Canada.

The Committee focuses on policy and technical public health aspects of the response as per the FPT Public Health Response Plan for Biological Events, informed by lessons learned from past public health responses.

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On May 1, 2020, SAC released recommendations on next steps for Canada entitled *Foundations for Living with COVID-19 in Canada: Lifting of Restrictive Public Health Measures*.

The SAC on COVID-19 reports to the Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health and to Health Ministers from all provinces and territories.

Deputy Ministers have also been meeting regularly across jurisdictions on key aspects of the pandemic response, such as provision of personnel protective equipment and supplies, testing and sharing of best practices.

The Federal Minister of Health has been engaging with her provincial/territorial counterparts very regularly through weekly meetings and regular bilateral dialogue to jointly address key issues and mobilize resources to support Canada's response to COVID-19.

International Collaboration

Q7. What are some of the key lessons learned from other countries and how are they being incorporated in the Government's response moving forward?

With the outbreak evolving rapidly around the world, the Government of Canada has and will continue to work closely with our international partners, including the World Health Organization, to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

In particular, Canada's ongoing engagement with country partners has enabled us to learn from others' experiences and best practices to inform and strengthen our domestic response. Existing mechanisms, such as the Global Health Security Initiative, the G7 and the G20, have facilitated such information sharing. For example:

- Through regular engagement with Canada's G7 Health Ministers, Canada gathered information from the United States to inform our sterilization plan for personal protective equipment. We are also engaged in ongoing information exchanges on approaches to serological testing with all G7 countries.
- The United Kingdom's risk communications approach and the importance of transparent communication and public education was also shared early on in G7 discussions as well as key considerations for implementing travel and border measures.
- The issue of repatriation of citizens was first discussed among senior officials through the GHSI network, with Canada learning from the experiences of Japan and the United States.

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On May 4th, Canada also joined several countries in co-hosting the launch of the Coronavirus Global Response, pledging over \$850M to support researchers and innovators develop solutions to test, treat and protect people from COVID-19.

Keeping Canadians Informed

Q8. What is the Government of Canada doing to keep Canadians informed on Canada's COVID-19 response efforts and actions they can take to remain healthy and safe.

On March 11, the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, announced \$50 million in funding for the Public Health Agency of Canada to support ongoing communications to keep Canadians informed and a national public education campaign to encourage the adoption of personal protective behaviours.

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Government of Canada has worked closely with provinces and territories, key partners and stakeholders to provide Canadians and health care professionals with the timely, trusted and evidence-based information they need to protect themselves, their families, their communities and their businesses.

To complement online content, the Government of Canada continues to update the Canada COVID-19 mobile app, which provides users with easy access to up-to-date information about COVID-19, trusted health resources and allows them to track COVID-19 symptoms daily.

The Wellness Together Canada portal for mental health and substance use provides access to credible information and connects them to peer support workers, social workers, psychologists and other professionals for confidential chat sessions or phone calls.

We have also used a wide variety of channels to provide information and updates to Canadians, including:

- the dedicated website Canada.ca/coronavirus and other linked pages on the COVID-19 response, which have had more than 167 million visits since its launch;
- daily briefings to the media;
- a toll-free information line [1-833-784-4397] with interpretation service available in 200+ languages open from 7 a.m. to midnight, 7 days a week;
- regular public advisories to inform Canadians and the media about emerging issues and to dispel misinformation about health products (e.g., natural health products, drugs and medical devices);

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- The Get Updates on COVID-19 email subscription service provides subscribers with critical information from the Government of Canada's COVID-19 website related to the pandemic;
- social media;
- TV, radio, print and digital advertising; and
- a nation-wide mail-out sent to all households across the country to reach Canadians who may not have access to or use online technology.