

**Remarks for
the Honourable Patty Hajdu
Minister of Health**

Appearance before the House of Commons

Government of Canada response to COVID-19

**May 25, 2020
Ottawa, ON**

Allotted speaking time: 20 minutes
Speech length: 2370 words (20+ minutes)

Check against delivery

Introduction

Mr. Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to speak today about the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

This pandemic has changed how we live, how we work and how we interact with others. It has quickly changed the tenor of life in Canada.

The Government of Canada has had to respond just as quickly — on so many fronts — to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

I am pleased to say that Canada's overall response has been strengthened by the excellent collaboration among federal, provincial and territorial governments. We have also been working closely with our indigenous partners.

Through a collective effort, we have managed to slow the spread of COVID-19 and bring the epidemic under control in Canada.

As of today, there are xxx,xxx confirmed cases in Canada, including x,xxx deaths. Each death is a tragedy. And every COVID-related illness causes suffering and anxiety.

I am relieved that the slower national growth rate of transmission has resulted in reduced daily cases of new infections. But there is still active transmission in many areas of the country.

So we need to remind ourselves that COVID-19 continues to be a serious health threat, and that the situation is evolving daily.

Accessing supplies quickly

In dealing with this virus, one of our top priorities is ensuring that our front-line workers have the masks, gloves and gowns they need to keep them — and all Canadians — safe.

That's why Health Canada has streamlined the regulatory process to expedite the review and approval of medical devices in Canada, which includes personal protective equipment.

This gives us the flexibility we need to quickly facilitate access to both domestic and international supplies of health products.

Throughout this pandemic, we have been making strategic use of Interim Orders to facilitate access to necessary drugs, equipment and devices.

In March, I signed an Interim Order that has helped speed up access to COVID-19 devices, including test kits, which allows the provinces and territories to identify new cases of the virus.

An additional Interim Order allowed for the exceptional importation of products related to COVID-19. When drugs

are not available, Health Canada now has a legal pathway to bring alternate supplies of drugs that are safe to the Canadian market. A similar approach is in place for medical devices.

Health Canada is also doing what it can to plan ahead so that our country is in the best possible position to access drugs to treat and prevent COVID-19 when they become available.

To that end, we are prioritizing the review of potential COVID-19 therapies and preventative measures. For drugs and vaccines that are investigational, the most appropriate way to access them is through a clinical trial.

The Department is working hard to facilitate and expedite the authorization of clinical trials for COVID-19 in Canada. This has reduced our review timelines from 30 days to less than two weeks ... without compromising on quality or safety.

And just last week, I signed an additional Interim Order that allows for a more flexible process for clinical trials involving drugs and medical devices for COVID-19.

Testing

The Government of Canada is supporting provinces and territories as they increase testing and contact tracing. Detecting cases and rapidly identifying contacts are fundamental public health priorities during a pandemic.

And we are working with these jurisdictions to put in place the capacity to respond to increasing demands.

Canada is currently testing approximately 26,000 people for COVID-19 every day. And we are working with manufacturers to ramp up testing capacity.

For example, federal scientists worked with LuminUltra, from New Brunswick, to develop testing reagents for use by provincial labs across the country, which is allowing for more diagnostic testing.

To date, Health Canada has authorized 19 diagnostic testing devices for COVID-19 in Canada. And we continue to work with industry and Canadian researchers to expand our testing options.

Earlier this month, Health Canada authorized two serological tests for sale in Canada, under the Interim Order respecting the importation and sale of medical devices for use in relation to COVID-19.

This type of test is not used for diagnosis. Rather, it detects antibodies to the virus which indicates that a person has been infected in the past and may have some degree of immunity.

The COVID-19 Immunity Task Force, which includes top Canadian doctors and researchers, is conducting a series of country-wide serological surveys — using these new

blood tests — which will tell us how widely the virus has spread.

This information will help us manage the pandemic until we have effective treatments or a vaccine.

Toward treatments and a vaccine

Although we may still be months away from a vaccine that would be widely available in Canada, we are investing in research to help us get there as quickly as possible.

As Canada's health research funding agency, the CIHR has moved at an unprecedented pace to mobilize the research community and deliver research funding programs.

In March, CIHR and its partners approved funding of \$54.2 million for 99 research projects that are now underway at universities and hospitals across the country.

These projects are providing the evidence needed to inform clinical and public health responses, develop and evaluate diagnostic tools and vaccines, as well as create strategies to tackle misinformation, stigma, and fear.

Last month, the Prime Minister announced \$114.9 million in new funding for the CIHR to accelerate the development of diagnostic tests, therapeutics, and vaccines against COVID-19.

And we are looking at ways to quickly bring therapies and vaccines to market.

Health Canada is in discussions with many vaccine manufacturers and researchers, both in Canada and abroad, to provide regulatory and scientific advice to facilitate the launch of vaccine trials in Canada as quickly as possible while ensuring safety.

On May 15, Health Canada authorized the first application for a COVID-19 vaccine clinical trial, which will be conducted by the Canadian Centre for Vaccinology in Halifax. This is the first of likely several vaccine candidates that will come to clinical trials in Canada in the months ahead.

All of this work is positioning us to take full advantage of effective treatments and vaccines once they are available.

Support for research

Looking to the future, the Government is investing heavily in research. On April 23, the Prime Minister announced more than \$1 billion in support for countermeasures to fight COVID-19.

This funding builds on the \$275 million investment for coronavirus research and medical countermeasures announced in March.

The new funding includes:

- \$10 million for a Canadian data monitoring initiative;
- \$10.3 million over two years, and \$5 million ongoing, to support the Canadian Immunization Research Network in conducting vaccine-related research and clinical trials.

In March, the Public Health Agency of Canada, in collaboration with several federal departments and agencies, published the Government of Canada's Research Response to COVID-19.

This report outlines the critical and innovative research taking place across Canada, including tools and solutions being developed to combat and treat COVID-19.

The Government is working to turn these significant findings and research into actions that will save lives across the country.

Physical distancing

With so many of us practising physical distancing, we have built the positive momentum needed to slow the spread of COVID-19. We need to protect our hard-won gains. For now, we must continue to stay home and stay vigilant.

We must also continue to wash our hands frequently and wear face coverings when we are in situations where we cannot maintain physical distance. We must stay home if we are sick.

We don't have to look far for examples of what can happen when too many people become infected at the same time. We have learned from the terrible situations in Northern Italy and New York City.

I am so proud of Canadians and the sacrifices we have all made to keep each other safe. We need to keep it up.

De-escalating current measures

In some parts of Canada, there is a cautious move towards resuming daily activities; but not all regions are there yet.

To get to that point, we must continue practising physical distancing, washing our hands and disinfecting high-touch surfaces frequently. Indeed, even after we begin to resume daily activities, these measures will continue to be essential.

A shared key objective is to minimize the risk of another wave of COVID-19 that forces governments to re-impose severe restrictions.

In order to meet this objective, it is crucial that testing and contact tracing capabilities are in place so that suspected

cases are detected quickly and all confirmed cases are effectively isolated.

The Government of Canada is working with provinces and territories on a testing and contact tracing strategy to assist in managing the different pandemic experiences across the country.

The strategy is designed to flexibly respond to the highly varied pandemic experience across the country and relies on collaboration to ensure that the necessary resources, technology and supplies are in place to expand testing and contact tracing.

This will help ensure that provinces and territories have the capacity required to rapidly detect cases, trace contacts, and isolate and quarantine infected individuals to support economic restart and living with COVID-19.

Shared guidelines for restarting the economy

If we stay the course, we will eventually get to the point where we can arrive at a “new normal”. We are working closely with the provinces and territories to determine the safest way to do that.

On April 28, the Prime Minister announced shared guidelines with the provinces and territories for restarting the Canadian economy.

The guidelines are based on expert, scientific advice and identify the steps we need to take before restarting the economy.

In essence, the federal, provincial and territorial governments have agreed to a gradual approach — one that protects the health of all Canadians.

Communicating With Canadians

Canadians have done an incredible job of adopting the public health guidance and changing behaviours to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We need to continue to provide straightforward and accessible information.

In April, the Government launched a new portal dedicated to mental wellness on Canada.ca/coronavirus and the Canada COVID-19 app. Wellness Together Canada connects Canadians to peer support workers, social workers, psychologists and other professionals. Confidential chat sessions or phone calls make it easier to find credible information and help address mental health and substance use issues.

And to minimize risk of importation, we continue to ensure travellers provide basic contact information to the Government of Canada upon entry.

The ArriveCAN App, launched during the week of April 29, provides an alternative to paper forms. It enables faster

processing at the border for travellers returning to Canada, and we encourage travellers to use it.

At the same time, the Public Health Agency is working with the Canada Border Services Agency to put in place enhanced border measures. PHAC is also increasing the presence of designated officials, including Quarantine Officers, at ports of entry across Canada.

Substance use and the overdose crisis

The pandemic has exposed people who use illegal drugs to additional barriers when it comes to accessing health and social services while at the same time placing them at increased risk of being infected with COVID-19 due to social marginalization and underlying health conditions.

In addition, there are concerns that people may be increasing their substance use as a response to the stress and isolation caused by physical distancing and pandemic-related anxiety.

In response, the Government of Canada is taking a number of targeted actions to remove barriers and reduce the risk of harm for people who use problematic substances.

We have made it easier for people to access the medications they need, by enabling pharmacists to extend and renew prescriptions, transfer prescriptions to other pharmacists, accept verbal prescriptions from physicians

and to allow for the delivery of controlled substances to patients to ensure continuity in access to treatment.

We have also made it easier for overdose prevention sites to be rapidly established in temporary community shelters.

In addition, Health Canada is supporting frontline workers who are delivering important substance use treatment and harm reduction services. We recently developed and disseminated a toolkit sharing guidance and other resources to better support people who use substances to physically distance, self-isolate and stay safe.

Homelessness

We are also concerned for people who are experiencing homelessness, which presents unique challenges at a time when we are asking Canadians to isolate at home.

The Government of Canada is investing \$207.5 million to support people experiencing homelessness, as well as those fleeing gender-based violence.

Of this, \$157.5 million will go toward the Reaching Home program and will be used to reduce overcrowding in homeless shelters.

We are also providing \$350 million for charitable organizations, who support the most vulnerable Canadians. These organizations are experiencing high

demand for their services during the pandemic, at a time when charitable donations have dropped.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, this is just a snapshot of some of the actions the Government has taken to protect the health and safety of Canadians from COVID-19.

As you can imagine, an incalculable amount of work is going on behind the scenes with our many partners across all levels of government.

All of this work continues to deepen our understanding of the disease and give us the scientific evidence and data we need to inform our public health response, decision-making and planning at local, national and international levels.

And as we make our way down the curve, there are lessons to be learned from other countries that are ahead of us on this path.

Move too soon, relax too much and COVID-19 cases will rise again. We must continue with strong public health efforts based on science and evidence to reduce transmission of the virus and minimize its overall impact, including the social and economic impacts on Canadians.

We must also plan and be ready for future waves, as there is still much we do not know about COVID-19. As the situation evolves so, too, must our response.

I can assure you that the Government of Canada will continue to do everything necessary to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the health, safety and well-being of Canadians during these difficult and uncertain times.

Thank you.