

Cancer Advocacy Coalition Canada

180 Bloor Street W. Suite 904

Toronto, On M5S 2V6

Tollfree number: 1-877-472-3436

Local 416- 538-4874 Fax 416-538-7319

Email: canceradvocacy@on.aibn.com

Website: www.canceradvocacycoalition.com

NEWS RELEASE

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Report Card 2001 on Cancer Care in Canada

“Canada is being overwhelmed by cancer”

December 13, 2001 - The Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada, a watchdog organization that tells Canadians what is really happening to our cancer system, has released its *Cancer Care in Canada, Report Card for 2001* and the statistics are disturbing.

Waiting Times

Based on a survey of all provinces, Canadians diagnosed with cancer will have different waiting times, access to treatment and survival rates, depending on where they live.

- For the 12 months ending August 2001, the waiting time for radiation therapy ranged from 19 days in Manitoba to 47 days in Ontario and anywhere from 21 to 49 days in Alberta. British Columbia reports a median waiting time of 21 days. The Canadian Association of Radiation Oncologists recommends that radiation therapy should begin within four weeks of referral to the specialist.
- Ontario estimates that in the 12 month period surveyed, the number of patients treated within the recommended four weeks ranged from 28 percent to 35 percent, while 40 percent of patients waited more than eight weeks from referral to the start of radiation therapy.
- Waiting times to begin chemotherapy, from the date of referral to the oncologist to the start of treatment, are highest in Newfoundland at 60 days and lowest in British Columbia at 15 days, with Ontario reporting 34 days and Alberta reporting 21-35 days.

Dr. Denis Roy, CEO of the Quebec Provincial Fight Against Cancer, says the delays from diagnosis and referral to treatment “are of paramount importance because it is at the very beginning of treatment that we can make a difference.”

Again this year, the BC Cancer Agency produced the best results for access to treatment and survival rates, but even the best system in the country has its problems. “Access to new drugs is more of a problem than wait times for therapy,” said Dr. Susan O’Reilly, head of the Division of Medical Oncology at the University of British Columbia and the BC Cancer Agency. “We may soon be in a position where provinces can’t afford to pay

for them and we will have to make some very tough decisions about what drugs or treatments drop off the list.”

Shortage of professionals

The culprit in these figures is a severe shortage of cancer care professionals in Canada, including nurses, oncologists and radiation therapists.

- Patients in Atlantic Canada wait the longest for an appointment with an oncologist – up to two months in Newfoundland.
- Prince Edward Island sends all its cancer patients elsewhere for treatment and New Brunswick’s shortage means that many patients are sent to Maine.
- Manitoba is unable to deliver new radiation therapies, such as brachytherapy for prostate cancer, because of a shortage of radiation therapists.

Across Canada there are not enough people working in cancer care to meet the demands of patients. “The country doesn’t understand the magnitude of the problem,” said Dr. Bill Evans, Executive Vice President of Clinical Programs at Cancer Care Ontario.

Dr. Brent Schacter, President and CEO of Manitoba Cancer Care, believes “the greatest challenge is the heavier burden of the growing incidence of cancer. It creates problems in a number of areas. It changes the way we do our work.” With the incidence of cancer growing at three percent per year, Canada does not have the professional resources to keep up.

Spending

Cancer spending by the provinces also varies widely. The investment per person (dividing cancer agency budgets by the provincial population in 2000) is an indicator of waiting times and barriers to treatment.

These figures are for the cancer agencies only, and do not include the cost of other services, such as diagnosis, surgeries in community hospitals or home care visits. Cancer agencies are responsible for research, education, prevention programs, radiation and systemic therapy.

- The highest annual spending occurs in Alberta and British Columbia (at \$45 and \$44 per person respectively);
- The lowest per capita spending is in Newfoundland, at approximately \$18 per year;
- Saskatchewan (\$35) Nova Scotia (\$31) and Manitoba (\$30) are mid-range;
- Ontario spends approximately \$21 per person on cancer research, treatment and education per year, barely beating Newfoundland for the smallest amount of per capita spending.
- Quebec and New Brunswick do not have organized cancer agencies and could not report on their cancer care spending. PEI sends its cancer patients elsewhere for treatment.

Data Collection

Data collection by provinces is so underdeveloped that only five provinces could report on survival rates, only six have any information about waiting times for radiation therapy or the interval between referral and the start of treatment. Poor data collection means that Canadian organizations responsible for cancer care do not know if they are delivering the care that people need.

The full report contains more details on all these subjects, plus:

- the prevalence of cancer as reported by six provinces (the others don't know);
- five and ten year survival rates for the top four cancers (in the very few provinces that collect such information);
- the priorities for improvement identified by each province; and
- a special report on Cancer Care Ontario.

Report Card 2001 can be found at: www.canceradvocacycoalition.com

- 30 -

Contact:

Pat Kelly
Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada
416-538-4874

Carol Loughrey
Fredericton, NB
(506) 452-2157

Dr. Jack Chritchely
Vancouver, BC
(604) 877-6183

Jan Capen
Victoria, BC
(250) 592-0796

Sylvain Clermont
Montreal, PQ
(514) 272-2897