



# Health and Health Care in the 21st Century

## WAVE 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ***Background and Methodology***

Over the next decade, our health care system will face a number of daunting challenges. Among the most significant of these challenges is Canada's aging population, and the associated pressures this will have on the health care system. Compounding this is the significant fiscal challenge being faced by governments in Canada. In an era of fiscal restraint, health care costs continue to soar: health care costs are greatly outpacing GDP growth, and health care spending accounts for as much as 40 per cent of provincial budgets. Given the crucial importance of the health care system, and in light of the upcoming federal-provincial health accord negotiations, EKOS Research Associates conducted a study to update and refine our understanding of Canadian views on health and the health care system.

The methodology for this study involved a nationally representative survey of 2,036 Canadians 18 years of age and older. We surveyed 534 Canadians by telephone and 1,502 respondents completed the survey online. The sample source for this study was members of the EKOS panel, which was specifically designed for online/telephone surveys. Our panel offers complete coverage of the Canadian population (i.e., Internet, phone, cell phone), random recruitment (in other words, participants are recruited randomly, they do not opt themselves into our panel), and equal probability sampling.

## ***Survey Findings***

Outlined below are key findings and conclusions from this study. The remainder of this report describes survey results in more detail. Where available, results are tracked to earlier studies. However, please note that only telephone results are tracked to ensure consistency with the methodology employed in these earlier surveys.

## ***Priorities and Threats to the Health Care System***

In order to provide context for the study, respondents were first asked to rate the priority of a number of policy areas for the federal government over the next five years. Results reveal that even when compared with a number of other pressing federal government priorities (such as the economy, unemployment, the environment, and national debt and deficit), health care and health are identified as the top federal priorities by Canadians (by 90 per cent and 88 per cent, respectively).

Survey respondents were also asked which of a number of aspects of health care is most important to them (i.e., quality of health care services, costs of the health care system to the country, the health of the Canadian population, and equal access to health care for all Canadians). The quality of health

care services is seen as most important (selected by 40 per cent of Canadians), followed by equal access (37 per cent). Tracking phone survey results reveals that the proportion of Canadians who identify equal access as being of greatest importance has increased somewhat since 2009, but has declined significantly since 1995. The importance assigned to the quality of health care services has declined somewhat over the past few years, but remains higher than in 1995 (when this question was first asked). Tracking further reveals that the perceived importance of the costs of the health care system has increased over the past few years.

Canadians were also asked a number of questions about the most serious threats or problems facing their health and the health care system. Respondents were asked to identify, unprompted, what they think is the most serious health and health care issue facing Canadians today. Wait times are identified as the most serious issue (by 18 per cent), followed by access to health care or a family physician (13 per cent), a shortage of medical practitioners (nine per cent), and our aging population (eight per cent).

Canadians were also asked about the seriousness of issues facing Canadians' health and the health care system through a prompted question. Results are similar to those found in the unprompted question: increasing demands on the health care system as a result of an aging population (83 per cent), insufficient health care professionals (82 per cent) and inefficiencies in the health care system (80 per cent), are identified as the most serious issues or problems facing health and health care in Canada.

Respondents further rated the seriousness of a range of threats to the health care system through a paired choice question. Interestingly, lifestyle choices that negatively impact health (which was not included in the prompted question above) is selected as the greatest threat. Consistent with other results, a shortage of health care professionals such as doctors and nurses, and insufficient accountability for money spent were also seen as being significant threats to the health care system.

### ***Perceived Performance of the Health Care System and Players***

The survey then examined Canadians' views on the performance of our health care system. Respondents were asked how Canada compares to a number of other developed countries (i.e., the U.S., Great Britain, and Japan) in terms of the health care it provides to its citizens. The vast majority of Canadians (78 per cent) believe that Canada provides better health care to its citizens than the U.S., however, Canadians feel less knowledgeable about how our system compares to the other countries examined. When asked how our health care system compares to Great Britain, fully four in ten did not provide a response. Of those that responded, 23 per cent believe that Canada provides better health care than Great Britain, while roughly the same proportion believe that Canada provides equal (18 per cent) or worse (19 per cent) health care to its citizens. Similarly, six in ten Canadians did not provide a response when asked to compare Canada to Japan in terms of the health care provided to citizens. Among those who did provide a response, equal proportions rated Canada's health care as better (15 per cent) as worse (14 per cent) compared to Japan.

When asked to rate the current performance of various players in the Canadian health care system, results reveal that Canadians rate the performance of individuals involved in the front-line provision of health care much more highly than they do the performance of governments and government bodies. The vast majority (86 per cent) rate the performance of nursing health professionals positively, followed closely by professionals such as doctors (80 per cent). In contrast, less than half rate the performance of governments and councils positively. Fewer than four in ten (38 per cent) rate the performance of their provincial government positively (and an equal proportion – 37 per cent – rate the performance of their provincial government poorly). Views lean even more to the negative in terms of federal performance in health care: fewer than three in ten rate the performance of the federal government positively (29 per cent), while the plurality (41 per cent) rate its performance as poor. Canadians were less likely to feel comfortable rating the performance of health quality councils or the Health Council of Canada (with 28 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively, not responding). Among those who provided a response, a slight plurality rate the performance of health quality councils as good (31 per cent), while fewer than one in four (23 per cent) rate the performance of the Health Council of Canada positively.

### ***Behaviours and Factors Affecting Health***

The survey also asked a number of questions about behaviours and factors affecting health. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various behaviours in helping them to maintain their health. All of the behaviours examined were seen as having a significant impact on an individual's health, however, refraining from smoking is seen as particularly important (identified as being very important by fully 82 per cent of Canadians). A further three-quarters of Canadians feel that fitness or being physically active (76 per cent) and nutrition or eating a well-balanced diet (74 per cent) are very important to health and illness prevention.

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of a number of different factors in influencing the overall health of the Canadian population. Lifestyle choices top the list, beating out other important factors such as a publicly-funded health care system, or the physical environment such as air and water quality. Interestingly, despite much research indicating a strong relationship between socio-economic status and population health, income and education levels are seen as the least important factors in influencing the overall health of the population by the Canadian public.

Respondents were also asked a forced choice question about the greatest impact on the health of Canadians. Consistent with other findings, Canadians perceive behavioural factors as more important than external factors. Canadians most often identify the daily activities of Canadians as being the factor that has the greatest impact on their health, and are far less likely to select other important factors such as income level, the health care system, air and food quality, or environmental factors.

## ***Two-Tiered Health Care***

The survey also asked a number of questions about “two-tiered” health care. Respondents were asked to rate the level of importance they place on maintaining a strong, publicly-funded health care system. Results indicate that Canadians place a great deal of importance on a public health care system, with nine in ten (89 per cent) saying access to such a system is important, and only five per cent placing little importance on publicly-funded health care.

Respondents were then provided with a brief definition of the term “two-tiered health care system” and asked to rate the extent to which they believe such a system exists in Canada today. Fully seven in ten (72 per cent) agree that a two-tiered health care system exists, and only one in four (21 per cent) disagree. Results further suggest that not only do Canadians largely perceive Canada’s health care system as two-tiered, they believe it is becoming increasingly so. Seven in ten (69 per cent) believe Canadian health care is becoming more two-tiered, and only three per cent believe it is becoming less two-tiered.

Canadians were also asked if they believe that allowing some private delivery of health care services will improve health care in Canada by relieving pressure on the public system, or whether they felt that this will worsen health care by siphoning resources from the public sector. Canadians are not particularly optimistic about the impacts of private health care, with the majority (60 per cent) concluding that allowing private services will cause the public system to deteriorate. Only one-third (36 per cent) are open to the prospect of private delivery of health care services as a way of reducing wait times.

## ***Conclusions***

Survey results reveal that the public believe health and health care should be the top federal government priorities, even when compared to other pressing issues such as unemployment, debt and deficit, and the environment.

Results further reveal that Canadians rate the performance of individuals involved in the front-line provision of health care (e.g., doctors and nurses) much more highly than they do the performance of governments (particularly the federal government) and government bodies.

Findings suggest that Canadians perceive behavioural factors as being more important than external factors in terms of health impacts. Canadians most often identify the daily activities of Canadians as being the factor that has the greatest impact on their health, and are far less likely to select other important factors such as income level, the health care system, air and food quality, or environmental factors. And, when asked to rate the importance of a number of different factors in influencing the overall health of the Canadian population, lifestyle choices top the list, beating out other important factors such as a publicly-funded health care system, or the physical environment such as air and water quality. Interestingly, despite much research indicating that higher income levels and educational attainment are associated with better

health, Canadians do not seem to understand this relationship: income and education levels are seen as being relatively unimportant factors in influencing the overall health of the Canadian population.

Survey results also indicate that a clear majority of Canadians feel that a two-tiered health care system exists in Canada, and that our health care system is becoming more two-tiered. Findings further reveal that Canadians are not particularly optimistic regarding the impacts of private health care, with the majority concluding that allowing private services will cause the public system to deteriorate, rather than helping to reduce wait times.





