

Pharmacare

Canada remains the only country with universal health care that does not include pharmacare. This election is an opportunity for federal parties to fix that. Canada currently pays the world's third highest prices for prescription drugs. At a minimum, universal pharmacare is likely to result in annual savings of \$5 billion, while also increasing patients' access to needed prescription drugs.

For decades, every commission, committee, and all credible academic studies of Canada's health care system have recommended implementing pharmacare. During the 2019 election, the Liberals, NDP, and Greens all had pharmacare high on their list of priorities. The government continued after the election to claim they were committed to pharmacare, and polls show the vast majority Canadians support universal pharmacare.

Unfortunately, in this election, it seems that there is less commitment on this critical issue. There has been steady and strong lobbying by those who gain from the current patchwork system, including the private insurers and the big pharmacare corporations and their supporters. Instead of pharmacare, they want a fill-in-the gaps approach that will increase their profits. Unfortunately, this will not reduce costs.

Until we have a universal public pharmacare system, all Canadians, businesses, and governments pay a high price. This is particularly true for the 1 in 10 Canadians who report they struggle to fill prescriptions for needed medication.

Liberals

The Liberals claim to still be committed to national pharmacare, but there is very little mention of pharmacare in their platform. Since the last election, the Liberals took a few positive steps towards pharmacare. Notable was the creation of a new Canadian Drug Agency and a move towards a national formulary. The platform also restates a commitment from 2019 to provide \$500 million for a national program for high-cost drugs for rare diseases. Unfortunately, the larger picture is less encouraging, as the blueprint and timelines outlined by the Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare have been effectively ignored.

Another positive step, which the Liberal platform highlights, is a recent agreement with PEI for \$35 million over the 4-year agreement to expand the province's drug formulary and lower co-payment costs. This is claimed to be the first agreement to build the foundation for national universal pharmacare. The reality is that national universal pharmacare is achievable but requires far bolder action than the Liberals seem to be willing to undertake. Canadians spent \$34 billion on prescription medicine in 2018 and would save billions with national pharmacare. The steps the Liberals have taken are small and incremental relative to the scope of national universal pharmacare. Without a real investment of significant funds, it will be difficult to secure provincial support for a national pharmacare program.

Conservatives

Instead of a pharmacare plan, the Conservatives propose working collaboratively with the pharmaceutical industry to lower drug prices, increase access to clinical trials in Canada, and promote biopharmaceutical R&D.

While this is a more nuanced message than the Conservatives' previous outright opposition to pharmacare, past attempts by governments to work closely with the pharmaceutical industry are one of the reasons for high drug prices in Canada.

NDP

The NDP remains committed to universal pharmacare, and their position is the same as in last election. They are the only political party to reassert their commitment to pharmacare this election. The NDP would commit \$10 billion annually, with a targeted start date of 2022, towards the establishment of a national universal pharmacare program. As part of this program, the NDP is also committing to develop a national strategy to cover drugs for rare diseases.

Green Party

The Green Party has supported universal pharmacare.

Conclusion

Pharmacare is essential and needs to be implemented as soon as possible. We currently spend more on prescription drugs than we do on doctors. It's estimated that we're paying \$5 billion to \$10 billion a year more for prescription drugs than we should. To add to the urgency, we have an aging population that will require more care and more medication to live a healthy life.

Medicare was never supposed to stop at doctors and hospitals; the original idea was to expand to pharmacare, dental care, and to continue to build on the core services. This election must take us forward toward national pharmacare. Canada cannot afford to remain the outlier on pharmacare in the world.

