



Society of Rural Physicians of Canada
Société de la médecine rurale du Canada

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'Current wait time guarantees are not addressing the desperate health needs of rural Canadians'

The Society of Rural Physicians of Canada supports the Discussion Paper "When the Clock Starts Ticking - Wait Times in Primary Care Discussion Paper" produced by the College of Family Physicians of Canada. The document is timely and appropriate.

The current wait time strategy does not however address the basic needs of rural Canadians in rural communities who often have difficulty accessing primary health care and keeping health care providers in their communities, let alone accessing diagnostic services and other more advanced treatments. In northern communities, the problems are compounded by the huge geographic area, and limited facilities in serious need of upgrading. People in rural communities also have the added burden of paying for the high cost of travel to urban centres to access the care they need, compounded by their loss of earnings and the absence of family and social support. Problems with access to health services quite often stem from serious shortages of health care providers for even the most basic health services.

The president of the Society of Rural Physicians, Dr. Michael Jong says 'Primary care wait times are indeed an issue in both urban and rural settings however the issue in rural-remote areas is a more basic one of access. In our remote communities where there are no resident family physicians, patients have to wait for a doctor to fly in or have to fly out hundreds of kms to see a doctor. On a per capita basis, there are half as many physicians in rural Canada as there are in the cities and these physicians are stretched to the limit. The Canadian Institute for Health Information reported last year that rural family physicians are more open to accepting new patients than their urban counterparts, despite the lower number of physicians and their broader scope of practice. This reflects the reality of living and working in rural communities where, knowing there is no one else to whom their fellow citizens can turn, rural physicians do not say no if a community member asks to be seen. Health is the top priority for all Canadians, both rural and urban. It is time that rural Canadians have a better shake at health care access. Rural physicians and rural Canadians need help. We look to our

federal members of parliament to help us address our needs.'

There is a strong link between health care and the sustainability of rural communities. Access to health care is an important factor in ensuring that people will be willing to live and companies will be willing to develop industries in rural communities. Limited health care access is forcing rural Canadians to relocate to urban centers. Canada's rural natural resources provide employment, forest products, minerals, oil and gas, food, tax revenue and much of our foreign exchange. The primarily rural based natural resource sector accounts for approximately 40% of our national exports .

In 2003, Mr. Romanow made a number of recommendations, some of which have been addressed. From a rural health perspective, the key recommendation was for the federal government to provide targeted funding to establish a new Rural and Remote Access Fund. This recommendation has yet to be implemented. The Society of Rural Physicians of Canada has developed a number of specific strategies aimed at addressing the challenge of rural health access and these are outlined in a brief entitled 'Federal Solutions for Rural Healthcare' , recently submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance and the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and Status of Persons with Disabilities. We cannot afford to ignore rural health issues any longer.

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Backgrounder

About the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada

The Society of Rural Physicians of Canada (SRPC) is the national voice of Canadian rural physicians. Founded in 1992, the SRPC's mission is to provide leadership for rural physicians and to promote sustainable conditions and equitable health care for rural communities. On behalf of its members and the Canadian public, SRPC performs a wide variety of functions, such as developing and advocating health delivery mechanisms, supporting rural doctors and communities in crisis, promoting and delivering rural medical education, encouraging and facilitating research into rural health issues, and fostering communication among rural physicians and other groups with an interest in rural health care. The SRPC is a voluntary professional organization representing over 2,000 of Canada's rural physicians and comprising 5 regional divisions spanning the country. <http://www.srpc.ca>