



NEWS RELEASE

Medical wait times cost Canadian patients more than \$2 billion in lost wages before COVID-19

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For Immediate Release

VANCOUVER—Long waits for surgery and medical treatment cost Canadians almost \$2.1 billion in lost wages and productivity last year, finds a new study released today by the Fraser Institute, an independent, non-partisan Canadian public policy think-tank.

And those costs could increase now that many provinces have postponed elective (or scheduled) surgeries as a result of COVID-19.

“Health-care workers across Canada should be commended for the superb job they’re doing to get us through this global pandemic. However, once elective surgeries are allowed to proceed again, they will likely face further challenges as they tackle the ever-increasing backlog of patients waiting for care,” said Bacchus Barua, associate director of health policy studies at the Fraser Institute and co-author of *The Private Cost of Public Queues for Medically Necessary Care, 2020*.

The study finds that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than one million Canadian (1,064,286) patients waited for medically necessary treatment last year, and each lost an estimated \$1,963 (on average) due to lost wages and reduced productivity during working hours.

Across Canada, the costs of waiting for medical care were about \$2.1 billion.

The study draws upon data from the Fraser Institute’s [Waiting Your Turn](#) study, an annual survey of Canadian physicians who, in 2019, reported a median wait time from specialist appointment to treatment of 10.8 weeks—three and a half weeks longer than what physicians consider clinically reasonable.

Crucially, the \$2.1 billion in lost wages is likely a conservative estimate because it doesn’t account for the additional 10.1-week wait to see a specialist after receiving a referral from a general practitioner. Taken together (10.1 weeks and 10.8 weeks), the median wait time in Canada for medical treatment was 20.9 weeks in 2019.

“Even before we started postponing surgeries as a result of COVID-19, patients across Canada were waiting a significant amount of time, and long health-care wait times mean lost wages and a reduced quality of life for patients,” Barua said.

“Now is the time to consider policy options that may benefit patients and alleviate strain on our public health-care system once the COVID- 19 crisis has run its course.”

Because wait times and incomes vary by province, so does the cost of waiting for health care. Residents of Manitoba in 2019 faced the highest per-patient cost of waiting (\$3,011), followed by P.E.I. (\$2,856) and Alberta (\$2,834).

Average value of time lost during the work week in 2019 for patients waiting for medically necessary treatment (by province):

British Columbia	\$1,776
Alberta	\$2,834
Saskatchewan	\$2,421
Manitoba	\$3,011
Ontario	\$1,408
Quebec	\$1,381
New Brunswick	\$2,679
Nova Scotia	\$2,386

Prince Edward Island	\$2,856
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$2,421

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