

HEALTH & HEALTH EQUITY



From affordable housing investment to job creation strategies, the provincial government makes decisions that have serious implications for the health and well-being of Ontarians. Before you vote on October 6th, choose a candidate that will make the health and well-being of you, your family, and your community a priority. The Wellesley Institute wants to help you better understand some of the top issues in this election. Ask local candidates where they stand on policy issues that affect your health and well-being.

A Good Health Care System Is About More Than Hospital Wait Times: Ontario Needs A Strong and Fair Health System

Everybody is concerned about health, but a good health care system is about far more than wait times and high-profile diseases. When we talk about the kind of health system we want we have to think about how we can best help people to stay healthy and the conditions and supports that promote health.

We like to think that in Ontario everyone receives the same quality of care and has the same opportunities for good health and well-being, no matter who they are or what their background. The reality, however, is that health inequities—differences in health outcomes that are avoidable, unfair, and systematically related to social inequality and disadvantage—are a very real problem in Ontario. Research shows that people who are poorer, who face racism and other forms of social exclusion, or who are recent immigrants, have poorer health than other Ontarians:

- Over three times as many people in Ontario in the lowest income category report their health to be poor or fair as compared with those in the highest income category;
- Three to five times more Ontarians in the lowest income category have diabetes or heart disease as compared with those in the highest income category;
- In Toronto, life expectancy for men in the lowest income category is 4.5 years less than those in the highest income category, and 2 years less for women in the lowest income category versus the highest;
- Nearly one in 10 people in Ontario have been diagnosed with diabetes and more than half of those with diabetes also have 2 or more additional chronic health conditions; lower income people and immigrants are more likely to have diabetes.

We need a health care system that recognizes that different populations in Ontario have different needs and aims to meet those needs. We need to ensure that no one is left out.

We Must Improve Access to Health Care Services

Improving access to primary care is one of the most effective ways to address the health needs of disadvantaged populations. Primary care is the crucial first line of contact and support within the health care system. Easy access to primary care is the key to whether individuals receive timely medical attention in the early stages of illness and supports health promotion.

Family Health Teams and other innovations in expanding primary care are often concentrated in wealthier neighbourhoods and support healthier people, meaning that the most disadvantaged people do not have access to essential primary care. The province can address this by ensuring that funding for primary health care is based on community need.

Community Health Centres' model of care explicitly prioritizes providing comprehensive and person-centred care to disadvantaged populations. CHC care is also more integrated: linking patients into further services and referrals and emphasizing health promotion activities to prevent illness and keep people well.

Over half of low-income people have not seen a dentist in the last year, twice the rate of the highest income men and three times the rate for women. Poor oral health has major impacts on overall health, contributing to diabetes and lung disease, in addition to causing extreme pain.

Currently, newcomers to Ontario have to wait three

months before they become eligible for OHIP coverage. The Ontario Medical Association (OMA) found that the three month wait period simply forces some of the most vulnerable people in our community to delay receiving essential care. By the time newcomers finally receive care, their health has often worsened—making their care more expensive—and negatively affects quality of life. The OMA found no evidence that the three month wait period actually saves the province money.

We Must Ensure Our Health System Provides Quality Care For All

Ontario is an incredibly diverse society. A key aspect of ensuring that all Ontarians receive quality care is to provide vulnerable populations with the tools and services that will improve both their access to and their ability to use health services.

Immigrants are not always treated equitably within the health care system. On average, immigrants are healthier than the Canadian-born population when they arrive in Canada, but their health tends to decline over time. People from different cultural backgrounds may need different approaches to health care delivery. Interpretation services for all Ontarians who need them are important; in situations where the practitioner and patient don't speak the same language, misdiagnoses and miscommunication can lead to poorer outcomes and avoidable complications, costs, and hospitalization.

To ensure all care is culturally appropriate, we need a solid commitment from the provincial government to provide health care practitioners with additional training, guidelines and supports.

The Wellesley Institute has a range of tools and resources to help policy-makers improve health equity in Ontario, including a Health Equity Impact Assessment:

<http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/policy-fields/healthcare-reform/roadmap-for-health-equity/health-equity-impact-assessment/>

WHEN PROVINCIAL ELECTION CANDIDATES ASK FOR YOUR VOTE, ASK THEM:

- How will your party reduce health inequities amongst the most disadvantaged people in Ontario?
- How will your party ensure that Community Health Centres and other primary care services are accessible to those most in need?
- Will your party commit to ending the three month waiting period for OHIP coverage for newcomers to Ontario?
- How will your party ensure that disadvantaged populations have access to high-quality dental care?
- What specific plans do you have to ensure that all Ontarians can access high-quality, culturally appropriate health care services?

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