



Policy Recommendations for the Health Human Resource Crisis

Background

The Canadian healthcare system is in crisis. Widespread accounts of emergency room closures and at-capacity intensive care units are reported daily in media, highlighting the acute impacts being experienced by Canadians. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers have warned of an impending crisis – a health human resources (HHR) crisis that is now upon us.

Respiratory therapists are a fundamental part of the Canadian healthcare system. This was no more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respiratory therapists were lauded for providing patients with life-saving treatments such as oxygen therapy or the insertion of airways and mechanical ventilation for patients no longer able to breathe for themselves – core components of the expertise provided by these health professionals. Respiratory therapists have been on the frontlines in all communities, providing care to Canadians in hospitals, in their homes, and virtually. As backlogged services impacted by the pandemic reopen, respiratory therapists working in areas such as cardiopulmonary diagnostics and anesthesia assistance will continue to play important roles in ensuring Canadians receive timely care.

However, the pandemic has taken its toll. Respiratory therapists are distressed and exhausted, adding to their longstanding sense of limited recognition and value placed on them by healthcare system leaders and politicians. Many have also been experiencing resource limitations, excessive workloads, and bullying. Alarming, respiratory therapists are showing signs of PTSD, symptoms of depression, and anxiety or stress at high rates. As a result, many respiratory therapists have left the profession – and more than 30% of respiratory therapists in Canada are considering leaving healthcare.

Prior to the pandemic, the [Government of Canada](#) predicted a shortage of respiratory therapists over the next decade. The impacts of that shortage are compounded by the current crisis. Without enough respiratory therapists, Canadians will not receive the crucial and critical respiratory care they require at the time they require it.

The Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists (CSRT), alongside other organizations representing the spectrum of healthcare providers, have in the past called for government action to avert the current crisis. Decisive investment into Canada's healthcare system will now be imperative to address it.

Examples of government action to date have included retention incentives that do not address underlying system issues. Importantly, these incentives are aimed at only one or a select group of health

professionals. These approaches are proving ineffective and can negatively impact many health professionals who already feel marginalized and undervalued.

Trying to fix the Canadian healthcare system by focusing only on physicians and nurses will not work. Instead, governments need to consider calls to equitably support all health professionals and more widely reframe a sustainable healthcare system. Respiratory therapists have always contributed widely across the continuum of care. Leveraging their expertise and enabling respiratory therapists to work to their full scope of practice will strengthen interprofessional teams, ensuring the healthcare system can meet Canadians' needs.

Policy Recommendations

Area of Need	Recommendations
Support Canada's current healthcare workforce	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Establish recruitment and retention strategies that equitably support respiratory therapists and all health providers across areas of need.2. Establish a national strategy to support the mental health of respiratory therapists and all healthcare providers.
Invest in Canada's future healthcare workforce	<ol style="list-style-type: none">3. Establish impactful pathways to get internationally educated respiratory therapists and other healthcare providers working.4. Improve educational system infrastructure to increase the number of respiratory therapists and other health providers in need.
Build sustainable health system models	<ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Ensure calls for system renewal are met by scaling up collaborative, interprofessional primary care teams that include respiratory therapists. This will allow Canadians to access timely care by health providers practicing in a team-based model.6. Establish a national workforce data collection approach that includes respiratory therapists and all healthcare providers to ensure that future HHR decisions are optimally informed.

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Basis for Recommendations

These recommendations emanate from discussions held during a number of health system stakeholder forums, data generated through research, and the voices of Canadian respiratory therapists. This includes outcomes from emergency summits hosted by the [Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Nursing Association](#), which included more than 40 healthcare organizations. These are further informed by the findings of Health Canada's Stakeholder Roundtables aimed at inspiring action in the face of Canada's HHR crisis.

Recommendations previously put forth by other stakeholders do not fully address the impacts being felt by respiratory therapists or the consequences to the healthcare system that result from a shortage of respiratory therapists. The recommendations presented here incorporate distinct attention to the perspectives of respiratory therapists that are aligned with and supportive of wider recommendations emanating from the spectrum of health system stakeholders.

About the Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists

The Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists (CSRT) is the national professional association representing respiratory therapists across Canada. The CSRT is the voice for Canada's community of respiratory therapists. The CSRT advocates for respiratory therapists, patients and families, and for the respiratory therapy profession in local communities, across Canada, and globally.

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