

[Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative Campaign](#)

Dear Ms. Koehn

Thank you for reaching out to the Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative campaign. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to your questionnaire and engage in a constructive dialogue with the Arthritis Consumer Experts.

- 1) **The time to address models of care in arthritis is now after years of being at the back of the line of health care planning and delivery in Nova Scotia. A major barrier is access to care, including the wait times for people with inflammatory arthritis for a first rheumatologist visit. There is a pressing need to explore, invest in, and develop different care models, such as team-based care, that allow people with arthritis to receive timely access to suitable care and support for managing their disease.**

What will your government do to provide high quality, evidence-based models of care to ensure more timely access to arthritis care and enable Nova Scotians to get the right treatment at the right time?

To ensure more timely and effective care for Nova Scotians, our government has created community-based models of care, allowing people to receive care closer to home.

Collaborative family practice clinics, a key component of our health home model, exemplify this approach by bringing together a team of healthcare professionals—doctors, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, dietitians, and social workers—to provide coordinated and continuous care. This model, part of our Action for Health plan, has received significant investment, resulting in more than 100 collaborative teams now active across the province. Last year, we invested an additional \$17 million to support the development of new clinics and strengthen existing ones across Nova Scotia.

In addition to collaborative clinics, we are expanding access to care through community pharmacy primary care clinics. These clinics play a crucial role in improving healthcare access by enabling pharmacists to manage chronic conditions, treat minor ailments, and prescribe medications. Since the launch of this model, pharmacy clinics have delivered over 190,000 services, addressing healthcare needs closer to home for thousands of Nova Scotians. Fourteen new pharmacies will join this initiative in the fall, further consolidating under the Community Pharmacy Primary Care Clinic program.

We remain focused on expanding these services to ensure that individuals with arthritis and other chronic conditions have more opportunities for timely consultations, to be heard by healthcare professionals, and to receive necessary treatments and medications.

- 2) Indigenous Peoples in Canada have some of the highest rates of serious or life-threatening arthritis in the world and are at greater risk for becoming disabled by arthritis or developing co-morbidities. Significant gaps in Indigenous arthritis care currently exist in Nova Scotia. Care models, such as having an Indigenous community-n based patient care facilitator, that address health care in a culturally relevant manner and the many barriers to care, have been proven to resolve care gaps more effectively and optimize health outcomes of Indigenous Peoples with arthritis and comorbidities**

Will your government introduce culturally appropriate, patient-centered policies to help Indigenous Peoples navigate the healthcare system and receive coordinated care within their community to manage their arthritis?

Our government is addressing the unique healthcare challenges faced by Indigenous communities by investing in the education of healthcare workers and supporting Indigenous health organizations with guidance from Indigenous communities.

We have invested in training healthcare professionals to understand and meet these cultural needs. This includes support for new medical programs at Cape Breton University and Acadia University, which emphasize rural and Indigenous health. The Acadia nursing program aims to graduate 63 nurses annually by 2027, with approximately 50 percent of seats designated for Mi'kmaq, other Indigenous people, and African Nova Scotians. Integrating more Indigenous healthcare workers into the system will help ensure culturally sensitive care.

Additionally, we have launched the Mi'kmaw cohort initiative at the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) Pictou campus. This program offers 30 Mi'kmaw students the opportunity to study practical nursing as part of the 120 new seats added in the 2023-24 academic year. Developed in collaboration with Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey and Tajikeimik, this initiative ensures that students receive training that aligns with their community's cultural values and health priorities.

We are also supporting Indigenous health organizations like Tajikeimik, which has received \$2 million as part of our recruitment and retention efforts outlined in the Action for Health plan. Partnering with Dalhousie University's L'nu Nursing Initiative, Tajikeimik is creating resources such as magazines and websites to showcase Mi'kmaw nurses, promote career opportunities, and guide applicants through the

process. Additionally, organizations can apply for up to \$100,000 from the Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment Community Fund to support related initiatives.

A PC government will continue to create a healthcare workforce that can deliver culturally competent care, to improve health outcomes in Indigenous arthritis care and overall health services.

- 3) **The next Nova Scotia government must take steps to ensure the sustainability of prescription drug plans and the continued affordability of prescription medicines for Nova Scotia patients. The Department of Health and Wellness stated at the launch of the Nova Scotia Biosimilars Initiative that it expected to save over \$13 million annually once it was fully implemented, thanks to people transitioning from originator biologics to their cost-effective biosimilars, which are highly similar versions of high-cost biologic drugs used to treat chronic diseases, such as inflammatory arthritis.**

Will your government commit to reinvesting biosimilars savings to increase accessibility to new medicines and expand coverage for existing medicines for people living with inflammatory arthritis?

We are open to exploring the possibility of using these cost savings if they have not already been diverted, or funds from other sources, to increase accessibility to medicines for people living with inflammatory arthritis. However, this will require close coordination with the Department of Finance to fully understand the financial implications and the Department of Health and Wellness to identify the best possible provider.

If re-elected, we will take the necessary steps to study how we can best meet the needs of people living with inflammatory arthritis.

- 4) **Some individuals with severe osteoarthritis require joint replacement surgery to achieve better quality of life, less pain and more joint function. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the guideline for knee and hip replacement is to receive surgery within 26 weeks. In Nova Scotia in 2023, only 47% of knee replacement patients and 53% of hip replacement patients were treated within that guideline and fell below the Canadian average. This deeply impacts the lives of Nova Scotia residents with osteoarthritis who require these surgeries.**

Will your government take steps to ensure timely, specialized care for Nova Scotia residents struggling with osteoarthritis, including joint replacement surgery wait times that are within medically recommended guidelines?

Healthcare remains a top priority for our party as we recognize the longstanding challenges within the system.

Over the past three years, we have focused on reducing administrative burdens across the healthcare system, enabling healthcare professionals to prioritize patient care over paperwork. In July 2023, we established new rules limiting employer requests for sick notes, estimated to save doctors 100,000 hours annually that can be redirected toward patient care. By reducing unnecessary tasks like writing sick notes, we help free up valuable time for healthcare professionals to better serve Nova Scotians.

Earlier this year, our commitment to improving healthcare efficiency was recognized when we received the Golden Scissors Award from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business for cutting red tape in healthcare. While this recognition is a significant achievement, we understand that further progress is necessary to fix the system.

To build on these efforts to cut red tape, we will continue to leverage the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness, which collaborates with healthcare teams to eliminate unnecessary administrative obstacles, allowing healthcare workers, such as surgeons, to spend more time performing surgeries.

To increase surgery capacity, we expanded operating room hours to nights and weekends and provided bonuses to incentivize surgeons and OR staff for working those shifts. Data from the first quarter of 2024-25 (April to June) shows positive trends, including reduced surgical waitlists and lower staff vacancy rates.

We are also committed to recruiting more physicians to increase the number of surgeries and improve overall healthcare access. Between April and August of this year, 73 net new doctors were recruited to Nova Scotia.

Our commitment to strengthening healthcare is unwavering, and we are encouraged by the positive momentum we are seeing. However, we recognize that more work is needed, and we will continue to be transparent with Nova Scotians as we implement our Action for Health plan.

- 5) Many Canadians are positively adapting to virtual care. A majority of respondents in an Arthritis Consumer Experts National Survey reported they believe virtual care could save costs in the healthcare system and improve access to specialists and timeliness of test results. However, respondents from underserved communities – rural and remote and Black, Indigenous and People of Colour - were over 3 times more likely to report difficulties using virtual care services.**

What will your government do to ensure the continuation, improvement, and expansion of virtual care for all Nova Scotia residents – both patients and health care professionals – and ensure access is equitable to all?

Our party recognizes the growing importance of virtual care and is committed to its continuation, improvement, and expansion for all Nova Scotians. Five years ago, virtual care was nonexistent, but today it is an essential part of our healthcare system.

Over 400,000 Nova Scotians have already downloaded the YourHealthNS app, providing easy access to health information. Health ambassadors worked within communities during the summer to help mostly seniors download the app, understand its features, and access their health data. We are committed to extending this outreach strategy to ensure equitable access for rural and remote communities, as well as for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour populations.

Through the expanded use of virtual care platforms like YourHealthNS and VirtualCareNS, Nova Scotians can access a wide range of healthcare services online, including consultations with local doctors and nurse practitioners. We have also increased access to mobile healthcare clinics and respiratory care in communities, along with expanding e-mental health supports to address the diverse needs of our residents.

Our commitment to using virtual care in innovative ways is further demonstrated by initiatives like the Nova Scotia Firefighter and Ground Search and Rescue Volunteer Assistance Program, which offers mental health support to first responders through virtual care.

We will continue to expand virtual care services to ensure that all Nova Scotians—regardless of location, background, or circumstance—have equitable access to the healthcare they need.