

Arthritis Consumer Experts letter-to-the-editor

Re: Addressing the arthritis crisis in Nova Scotia

Health care delivery is one of the most pressing issues for Nova Scotia voters in the upcoming election. Arthritis affects one in five Nova Scotia adults and more people than heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and dementia combined. Despite the notion that “arthritis” is a disease of older adults, two-thirds of Nova Scotians living with arthritis are younger than 65. Several of the most severe forms of disease strike young people between the ages of 20 to 50 yrs old. It is a leading cause of disability in Nova Scotia, costing millions annually in healthcare and lost productivity.

The impact of arthritis is a long ignored and growing crisis in Nova Scotia, which received a failing grade in the arthritis community’s 2023 State of Arthritis in Canada Report Card.¹ The way people with arthritis access and receive health care varies significantly across the province. Nova Scotians living with inflammatory arthritis – like rheumatoid arthritis, axial spondyloarthritis, psoriatic arthritis or lupus – are adversely affected as they depend on getting a timely and accurate diagnosis, fast access to rheumatologists, and appropriate public reimbursement for essential medications.

Nova Scotia’s healthcare system and economy are already under tremendous pressure. The next Nova Scotia government has a chance to take bold action on arthritis care by addressing the following key issues:

Improving delivery of arthritis care

Despite affecting more than 200,000 Nova Scotia residents, arthritis has consistently been at the back of the line for health care delivery. One of the most urgent needs is access to specialized care, especially for people with inflammatory arthritis waiting for their first visit with an arthritis medical specialist.

The next Nova Scotia government must lead in exploring, funding, and implementing different care models, such as team-based care, that allow people with arthritis to receive access to the right treatment at the right time.

Supporting Indigenous arthritis health

As a result of racism in the healthcare system and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have some of the highest rates of serious and life-threatening forms of arthritis in the world. Indigenous Peoples in Nova Scotia are at greater risk for becoming disabled by arthritis or developing co-morbidities due to arthritis, compounded by difficulties navigating the province’s chronic disease management system.

¹ State of Arthritis in Canada Report Card, October 2023, <https://arthritis.ca/about-us/what-we-do/advocacy/report-card>

The next Nova Scotia government must introduce culturally appropriate, patient-centered care to Indigenous Peoples, ensuring they receive coordinated support within their community to manage their arthritis.

Sustainability of public drug plan

The sustainability of the Nova Scotia Pharmacare Programs is critical as patients in the province face rising costs for essential arthritis medicines. The Department of Health and Wellness expects to save over \$13 million annually through its Biosimilars Initiative.

The next Nova Scotia government must commit to reinvesting biosimilars cost savings to make new life saving medications more accessible and expand coverage for existing medicines for people with inflammatory arthritis.

Joint replacement wait times

For Nova Scotians with severe osteoarthritis, joint replacement surgery can help them achieve better quality of life with less pain and more joint function. Yet, in 2023, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, only 47% of Nova Scotians needing knee replacements and 53% needing hip replacements received surgery within the medically recommended 26-week guideline.

The next Nova Scotia government must prioritize reducing wait times for joint replacement surgery to ensure timely, specialized care for people living with osteoarthritis.

The time to address arthritis care is now. The next Nova Scotia government must act to prevent the arthritis crisis from escalating further.

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