Health Care Challenge: The COVID-19 Pandemic

Canada's health care system is subject to numerous pressures. From issues such as the increasing wait times to chronic diseases on the rise, another significant area which is currently impacting many Canadian's is the COVID-19 pandemic. With this year's pandemic, the health care system, has been stressed and burdened with COVID-19 patients in addition to patients with other illnesses. Ontario health officials have said that when more COVID-19 patients are in intensive care, medical care in hospitals not related to the disease becomes nearly impossible to handle.

While the pandemic situation is not uniform across the country, overall, there has been a steady increase in hospitalizations in provinces with high infection rates since October 2020. Once someone is hospitalized with COVID-19, they tend to stay in the hospital for about 16 days, although it's often longer for those with severe illnesses. Hence, this has strained the hospital and health care system in Canada, especially Ontario and Quebec.

Modelling made public on December 10 warned the province of Ontario that it would surpass 300 COVID-19 patients in intensive care later in the month and approach 400 in early January. The ICU occupancy passed the 300 mark just after Christmas and hit 400 on Jan. 9, according to the official daily reports by Critical Care Services Ontario.

To free up beds, staff and equipment for COVID-19 patients during the first wave in the summer, hospitals had to cancel planned surgeries, with a 47 per cent decline in the number of procedures performed from March to June, according to data by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). A Deloitte study commissioned by the Canadian Medical Association in October estimated that at least $1.3 billion is required in additional funding to return wait times for six types of procedures to pre-pandemic levels.

There have been many new policies and implemented due to the pandemic. Many of the policies included the mandatory masks in indoor public spaces, stay-at-home emergency orders in addition to legal mandates such as fines for failing to social distance, large gatherings and potential jail time for more severe violations as noted by the *Reopening Ontario Act, 2020*. Even with such strict restrictions, the case counts are still relatively high projecting to February to be the toughest month of the pandemic if Ontarians do not abide the strict lockdown measures.

When addressing the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to Canada's health care system, more importantly Ontario, there are many interlocking factors that CAN and NEED to be addressed. This year's challenge is to propose an innovative approach to reduce the burdens and stress on the health care systems. Teams are open to creating federal, provincial or municipal health policies, hospital specific policies or interventions they deem appropriate that will help Canada with their consistent increase in daily COVID-19 cases that are affecting the health care system.