Expanding urgent health supports for Canada’s children and youth

April 19, 2021

Children’s Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada commend the federal government for demonstrating their commitment to Canadian families in the 2021 Federal Budget. We acknowledge and applaud significant investments that support broad conditions for good health and wellbeing of Canada’s 8 million children and youth, and their families. We are encouraged by funding to support a green recovery to address planetary health.

Historic investments targeting the foundations of a universal childcare program will pave the way for many children to have access to robust early learning which promotes lifelong wellbeing; increases in minimum wage will work to lift children and their families out of poverty; significant investments to ensure access to essential health services for First Nations and Inuit; investments in pediatric oncology address the number one cause of death by disease in children, and a doubling of student grants will bring new learning and education opportunities for youth. The bold ambition of this budget is to be applauded.

However, children’s health leaders know - and Budget 2021 acknowledges - that children and youth have paid a high price during this pandemic, and their mental health, in particular, has suffered tremendously as a result. Federal investments to create innovative mental health interventions and expand online portals and crisis support channels are important and commendable commitments – though insufficient to meet the urgent and growing demands for complex healthcare interventions to address the crisis in child and youth mental health.

Bruce Squires, Board Chair, Children’s Healthcare Canada, states, “Children’s hospitals across the country are facing unprecedented emergency department visits from youth suffering from complex eating disorders, anxiety, and suicide attempts. Federal leadership is required to urgently build systems capacity to address the demand for services that existed prior to COVID-19, further exacerbated by the pandemic.” Earlier this year, Children’s Healthcare Canada reported that children’s hospitals are experiencing, on average, double the number of admissions following attempted suicide, a three-fold increase in admissions related to substance use, and a 60% increase in the number of admissions related to eating disorders.

Children’s Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada had estimated $450 million dollars was required to address current gaps in services and infrastructure to support children’s mental health. “Child & adolescent and parental mental health & addiction services have been under resourced for decades,” says Dr. Andrew Lynk, President of the Pediatric Chairs of Canada. “We hoped to see the federal government invest with intention to build capacity at the front lines, to reduce wait times for mental health services, and to expand the range of mental health and addictions services for children & adolescents with special needs or medical complexity.”

What’s more, there remains significant opportunity to invest in child and youth health research – specific to COVID-19, but also beyond. Considerable investment into health research and data collection is urgently needed to create meaningful long-term policy and program initiatives that improve child and youth health outcomes.
In 2020 (pre-pandemic), UNICEF reported that Canada ranked 30th of 38 OECD countries when it comes to the health and wellbeing of children and youth. Poor measures of mental and physical health have been key contributors driving our low performance. Many announcements in Federal Budget 2021 will facilitate important steps forward to measurably improve children’s health and wellbeing. Children must be the focus of this country’s pandemic recovery efforts – including investments in their mental health. But time is running out - too many kids are barely treading water.

About Children’s Healthcare Canada

Children’s Healthcare Canada is a national association representing health service delivery organizations serving children and youth. Our members include all sixteen Canadian Children’s Hospitals, Regional Health Authorities, Community Hospitals, Rehabilitation and Children’s Treatment Centres, and Home Care Agencies. Through purposeful partnerships, we accelerate excellence and innovation in health systems caring for children and youth.

About Pediatric Chairs of Canada

Founded in 1960, PCC represents the Department Heads (Chairs) of Pediatrics within the seventeen Canadian medical schools. Collectively they provide national leadership in research and education to promote the health and healthcare of children and youth in Canada.

-30-