



April 23, 2020

The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos,
President of the Treasury Board
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA), which represents 15,000 physiotherapy professionals and students across Canada, I would like to thank the Government of Canada for its rapid and multifaceted response to address the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on Canadians. In particular, the CPA appreciates the decision made by Treasury Board in March to temporarily remove the prescription requirement for physiotherapy services in Canada under the Public Service Health Care Plan (PSHCP). As provincial orders and infection control measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have been extended across Canada, and the health care system continues to urgently respond to the pandemic, we request that you extend the prescription exemption for physiotherapy services until such a time as the pandemic is contained. We also encourage you to consider making this exemption permanent.

The majority of health benefit plans in Canada do not require members to visit a physician to obtain a referral prior to accessing physiotherapy services. As previously stated, the CPA feels that the move toward direct access to physiotherapists under the PSHCP is a positive step that will reduce the burden on the health care system in a meaningful way as our communities respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. We reiterate that while this meets the immediate needs of public servants accessing physiotherapy services, the health care system stands to be facing additional pressures due to COVID-19 and throughout the recovery phase following the lifting of physical distancing measures. Many Canadians are struggling with access to health care services due to physical distancing measures or are unwilling or unable to go to hospitals out of concern of contracting the COVID-19 virus. Timely access to physiotherapy services where appropriate is of particular importance for those individuals who, at the start of the pandemic situation, were at the start of recovery, were in the process of receiving treatment, or have since sustained injuries that are treatable by physiotherapy services.

A growing body of evidence indicates that direct access to physiotherapy services is likely to result in reduced health services costs and does not put patient safety at risk (Bury and Stokes, 2012). In a review of published patient case reports, physiotherapists were found to use effective multifactorial screening strategies for both referred and direct-access patients, leading to timely patient referrals to physicians (Boissonnault and Ross, 2012). For patients with musculoskeletal problems, direct access to physiotherapists who specialize in this area of



treatment can unburden the workload of general practitioners (Foster, Hartvigsen and Croft, 2012). Finally, in a study examining unrestricted direct access to a physical therapist when treating patients with a new onset of lower back pain, direct access was found to be associated with lower costs and lower overall health care services utilization (Garrity et al., 2020). This evidence supports efforts aimed at ensuring reduced burden on the health care system now and into the future, enabling both access and cost reduction measures while ensuring the provision of high quality and appropriate services.

Reverting to measures where the PSHCP requires a physician visit only to get a referral for physiotherapy services, would place additional burden on an already taxed health care system. Prior to the pandemic outbreak, many people had restricted or no access to family doctors. The situation today is even more dire. For Canadians who experience the additional hurdle of a 'waiting period' in acquiring a physician's referral prior to receiving treatment by a physiotherapist, this step only serves as another barrier to accessing services.

Physiotherapists are an integral part of the health care system and they play a key role in protecting, maintaining and improving the health and wellbeing of patients. We encourage you to support the critical role of physiotherapists during these difficult times by extending the prescription exemption for physiotherapy services under the PSHCP beyond the current April 24 deadline, and to consider making this removal permanent. We look forward to continuing to support the government in its efforts to deal with COVID-19 pandemic and welcome any opportunities to contribute to its decisions and actions. Please contact us with any questions or if we can provide any further information.

Sincerely,

John-Paul (JP) Cody-Cox
Chief Executive Officer
jpcodycox@physiotherapy.ca

cc:
The Honourable Bill Morneau, Minister of Finance
The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health