

## Liberals have made a momentous promise on primary healthcare

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Dr. Charles Webb

The Liberal Party's campaign platform makes three distinct commitments to strengthening Canada's public healthcare system. Specifically, the Liberals' have committed to improving Canadians' access to 1) "a family doctor or primary health care team;" 2) "mental health services when they need them;" and 3) "affordable prescription drugs."

In late September, Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau reiterated the first commitment, saying: "We're going to close the gaps in the healthcare system, and make sure people can get the care they need, when they need it most."

Trudeau's emphasis on access to team-based primary health care is consistent with ongoing efforts at transforming a system in crisis. His support—in the form of a \$6 billion "down payment"—is unprecedented.



Dr. Granger Avery, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Dr. Charles Webb.

This is the kind of resourcing, and an opportunity for improvement, that comes around once in a lifetime. This is the bravery required to move away from small scale, provincially siloed tinkering, and towards broad, cross jurisdictional improvements. Trudeau is to be commended for his commitment not just to improving access, but to transforming our system towards primary health care delivered by multi-disciplinary teams. He has fearlessly, as the saying goes, touched the third rail of health reform in our country.

I am delighted by his insistence that we—as professionals, and as a nation—can and must collaborate better on something that is so crucial to all of us. Now is indeed the time for committed Federal leadership in not just solving the access-to-care crisis currently experienced by so many rural as well as urban Canadians. Such leadership is also sorely needed to transition us to the community based, population focused, preventative and holistic services of team-based primary health care.

I am very pleased to report that the primary health care community has responded, as a team, to the Liberals' unprecedented commitment. On Oct. 3 in Vancouver, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA); the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC); the Canadian Association of Social Workers; and the Canadian Nurses Association endorsed this election promise. The CMA is standing by, fully committed to the hard interdisciplinary work that will be required to transform dollars into real improvements in access to primary health care generally, mental health specifically, and affordable prescription drugs.

The members of this transformative coalition now have the opportunity to roll up their sleeves alongside provincial premiers and ministers of health, professional associations and colleges, and patient groups to make the changes necessary to improve access, outcomes, experiences, and system efficiency.

The many professionals in this coalition have a deep knowledge, and lived experience, of the front-line challenges of delivering primary health and mental care. Having worked on the thorny problems of marijuana legislation and medical assistance in dying, the CMA is particularly well versed in the higher order challenges of stitching together policies and alliances on highly contentious issues. As a GP with over 30 years of experience I look forward to the coalition and the CMA as coordinator combining local knowledge with consensus building skills to meet the primary health care transformation challenges that lie ahead.

The coalition has its roots in an address to the Vancouver Medical Association's (VMA) 2017 Osler Dinner. Given by CMA president Dr. Laurent Marcoux, the address, and its discussion of the crisis of access to care, galvanized the room, including attendees B.C. Health Minister Adrian Dix, B.C. Attorney General David Eby and federal MPs Dr. Hedy Fry and Joyce Murray. The Primary Health Care Transition Fund (PHCTF)—\$800 million of federal funding committed by the Chrétien government in 2000—was, as Marcoux's talk came to a close, at the centre of the discussion.

Over the two years since the Osler dinner, those who would become the coalition's foundation members began meeting to discuss a new, bolder version of the PHCTF. These included: members of the CMA's senior leadership policy and political action staff; the presidents and CEOs of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the CFPC; past presidents of the Doctors Of BC; Dr. Hedy Fry; the President of the Treasury Board and Minister of Digital Government Joyce Murray; and most recently, the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Dr. Carolyn Bennett

All of this highlights the role small organizations like the VMA can play when connected to and supported by the CMA and local provincial and federal MPs and MLAs. Once again the CMA has not just fulfilled, but excelled at its mandate to provide a national voice on, and to co-ordinate collaborative solutions to, Canada's locally identified challenges.

Personally my great hope is that the coalition specifically, and Canadians more broadly, have the chance to complete the important transformative work that has been started. That Trudeau and the Liberals have laid out support for accomplishing this in their platform confirms for me that primary healthcare transformation can, like so much else, be achieved when we engage and unite both within and outside of our professional community to meet our nation's needs.

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