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Series: Canada's War on Cancer

With an ageing Baby Boom generation set to test the medical system like never before, a multi-part series analyzes the state of cancer in Canada. In Part 1, we examine the calls for a national strategy to combat the disease that will become the country's number-one killer.

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Ottawa - Canada is lurching toward a crisis in cancer control and there is a "real and present danger" the country's health care system will not be able to afford treatment for the tidal wave of patients who will get the disease in the decades ahead, a major new report says.

The warning is contained in a blueprint for action on a national cancer strategy prepared by the country's cancer experts.

The document, obtained by CanWest News Service, is more than five years in the making and has been presented to the federal government. It outlines how Canada's ageing and growing population will create a steady rise in the number of people who will develop cancer and who will die from the disease.

"Cancer has an ever-expanding impact on the lives of Canadians and on the economic interests of the country," the report says. "Yet Canada is falling behind other developed countries in meeting this growing cancer burden."

There will be a "significant increase in the number of new cancer cases," says the report, adding this spike in demand for medical services "will cause inflationary pressures and put the sustainability of the health care system at risk."

This year, it is estimated 149,000 Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer -- 3,500 more than last year. As well, 69,500 Canadians will die of the disease -- 1,200 more than last year.

On the basis of current trends, 38% of Canadian women and 44% of men will develop cancer during their lifetimes. As well, 24% of women and 29% of men will die from cancer. Within the next five years, it will replace cardiovascular disease as the No. 1 killer in Canada.

Dr. Simon Sutcliffe, president of the B.C. Cancer Agency, says the most frequent question he gets from taxi drivers is: "So, you're a cancer doc. How are we doing?"

The answer is always the same: The glass is half full and half empty.

In recent decades, there has been "spectacular success" in lowering mortality rates for some diseases, such as Hodgkin's disease, testicular cancer, childhood cancers and breast cancer.

But, Dr. Sutcliffe says, that does not diminish the fact more people are getting the disease and dying from it than ever before, because of our ageing and growing population.

"I think the demographics are so mind-numbing that people just throw up their hands and roll their eyes and say, 'It's too big to do anything about.' And yet, the reality is, it isn't too big to do anything about. There is tremendous power to influence this problem."

Dr. Sutcliffe is a senior member of a coalition of experts pushing for a national strategy on cancer control. The coalition's report, prepared by experts ranging from provincial cancer agencies and researchers to the **Canadian Cancer Society**, projects costs over the next 30 years that are staggering. They include \$176-billion in direct health care costs for cancer patients; \$540-billion in lost wage-based productivity as cancer patients temporarily or permanently leave their jobs; and \$248-billion in lost tax revenues because those patients are off work.

The coalition is calling for a \$260-million, five-year plan that would provide more consistent care nationwide in such areas as screening programs to catch the disease in its early stages; clinical practice guidelines on the most up-to-date treatment; the types of drugs that should be publicly insured; standards on how chemotherapy is practised, prescribed and administered; and guidelines for palliative care.

The government, however, plans to treat cancer as part of an "integrated disease strategy" with a \$300-million, five-year plan that attempts to persuade Canadians to lead healthier lives, reducing their risk of getting cancer, heart disease and diabetes. Much of that money will be allocated to programs to attack all three diseases, but under details announced this week, part will be directed to "disease specific" efforts -- \$90-million for diabetes, \$59.5-million for cancer and \$18.9-million to develop a cardiovascular disease "action plan."

That sparked criticism from Conservative MP Steven Fletcher and cancer experts, who said the new strategy falls far short of what is required to combat cancer.

Tomorrow, cancer-control experts begin meeting in Vancouver at the first international conference on strategies for fighting the disease, which the World Health Organization says kills 6 million people worldwide annually.

In Canada, there are millions of ageing Baby Boomers who are entering the danger zone. This year, 44% of new cancer cases diagnosed will occur in people over the age of 70; 25% of cancer cases will come in those aged 60 to 69; 18% will occur in those aged 50 to 59.

This increased cancer rate with age is probably due to a combination of increased and prolonged exposure to carcinogens and a weakening of the body's immune system.

While there have been improvements in survival rates for some types of cancers, in total, cancer still kills nearly half of its victims. The coalition's report notes that cancer takes the lives of more people in Canada than strokes, respiratory disease, pneumonia, diabetes, liver disease and HIV/AIDS combined.

Getting through the next three decades -- as the bulge of ageing Baby Boomers reaches a peak and then levels off -- will be more difficult than many might imagine. Productivity throughout the Canadian workforce will be severely hampered.

Over the next 30 years, an estimated 2.4 million Canadian workers will get cancer and 872,000 will die of it.

The report says the cancer system is already undermined by "serious and ongoing cancer workforce shortages" that "threaten patient safety and service quality [and] generate longer wait times."

All this will have a dramatic impact on economic growth and the ability of governments to raise sufficient revenues to properly treat cancer patients, warns the report. "There exists the real and

present danger that the increasing cost of health care and the higher volume of cancer cases will place severe pressures on the sustainability of the health care system in Canada."

The fight against cancer figures prominently in a potential political showdown brewing between Prime Minister Paul Martin's government and the provinces.

At the top of the agenda this weekend at the annual meeting of Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh and provincial health ministers is whether the provinces will fulfill their pledge -- made when they were given \$41-billion in federal funds last year -- to devise standards by Dec. 31, 2005, for how long patients should have to wait for key medical services. Provinces are suggesting they might not make that deadline and that, ultimately, standards might vary from province to province.

But Mr. Martin and Mr. Dosanjh have declared they expect provinces to deliver on their pledge. With a federal election sometime in the next few months, it's critical for the Liberals that voters are assured waiting lists will get shorter -- not longer.

For cancer, however, the harsh truth is that rising caseloads will make it increasingly challenging to provide quality care.

Terry Sullivan, chief executive officer of Cancer Care Ontario, the provincial government's cancer advisory agency, says the growth of cancer cases is like a "slow epidemic" -- making it different from other health threats, like bird flu, that grab attention.

"This is not a sudden threat," Mr. Sullivan says. "This is a certain threat."

"More people will have died of cancer in Ontario from the time you and I got up this morning than have died from avian flu, SARS and West Nile Virus to date.

"That's why it's more like a glacier moving slowly with a destructive force. It's not an avalanche, but it's a certain force moving forward in time."

Illustration:

- Black & White Photo: Photodisc / Cancer kills more Canadians than strokes, respiratory disease, pneumonia, diabetes, liver disease and HIV/AIDS combined. A coalition of experts is calling for a \$260-million, five-year plan to provide more consistent cancer care nationwide.
- Graphic/Diagram: **Canadian Cancer Society**, Canadian Cancer Statistics 2005, CanWest News Service / CANCER'S TOLL ACROSS CANADA: (See print copy for complete graphic/diagram.)