

ARTHRITIS SOCIETY CANADA

ALBERTA 2023 PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS SUBMISSION

Delivered to:
Alberta Treasury Board and Finance

January 2023



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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Arthritis Society Canada, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the Alberta Treasury Board and Finance 2023 pre-Budget consultations.

Arthritis Society Canada is the country's national charity dedicated to extinguishing arthritis. We represent the six million Canadians living with arthritis, including the 650,000 Albertans living with arthritis today. There is no cure, and the fire of arthritis can cause excruciating pain, limited mobility and diminished quality of life. Arthritis is a leading cause of workplace disability and one of the major health challenges facing our health care system today. Bold and innovative action is urgently needed, or the number of Albertans living with arthritis will increase to more than one million by 2035, many of them under the age of 65.

As you begin your budget consultations, we are pleased to provide four detailed recommendations, that will support Albertans living with arthritis:

- 1) Continue to address wait times for joint replacement surgeries**
- 2) Invest in arthritis-specific specialty and community care**
- 3) Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options**
- 4) Support innovative solutions and research to help extinguish arthritis**

1. Continue to address wait times for joint replacement surgeries

Arthritis is the leading cause of joint replacement, including over 99% of knee replacements and more than 70% of hip replacements. With the number of people with arthritis expected to balloon by 2035, even more people will need joint replacements.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), the benchmark wait time for hip and knee replacements is 182 days. The most [recent CIHI data](#) shows that 47% of Albertans waiting for hip and knee replacement did not have their surgeries performed within the recommended time. CIHI data also shows inconsistency across the province in meeting targets, with some regions having a much lower percentage meeting the six-month target.

This prolonged wait is leading to unnecessary pain and suffering for many Albertans who are prevented from contributing to their families, communities, and workplaces. There are potential downstream health impacts that increased wait times have for arthritis patients waiting for joint replacement surgery, such as the increased use of opioids for pain relief. Surgery delays are not only devastating for individuals but can also lead to significant additional costs for the healthcare

system due to the associated co-morbidities, including weight gain, diabetes, heart and circulatory issues, mental health conditions, and other compounding health challenges.

We were pleased to see the government's investment to address surgical backlogs in the 2022-23 Budget and support the ongoing efforts of the Alberta Surgical Initiative. We encourage the province to work with the federal government and stakeholders, including our organization, to develop an innovative, coordinated plan with the necessary tools to fix the wait times issue.

Arthritis Society Canada's report [The Wait: Addressing Canada's Critical Backlog of Hip and Knee Replacement Surgeries](#) provides a wide-range of solutions to innovate and achieve effective patient-centred care both provincially and national that include:

- a. Ensuring innovative models of care are replicated and shared widely so more patients have access to their benefits
- b. Standardizing how patient data is collected and reported to make it easier to set national standards and benchmarks
- c. Leveraging digital technology to reduce wait times, maximize limited health resources and improve co-ordination of care
- d. Increasing access to community-based joint health management programs (e.g. GLA:D <https://gladcanada.ca/>), so more patients have access to proven programs that effectively manage pain pre-op and better optimize results post-op
- e. Ensuring savings from surgical efficiencies are re-invested into improving patient care.

2. Invest in arthritis-specific primary and community care

Arthritis Society Canada supports the government's primary health care strategy to improve patient access to primary care including team-based care. As arthritis has such a profound impact on quality of life, including the ability to work, patients require access to a team of health care providers, including general practitioners, rheumatologists, dermatologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and social workers. Team-based arthritis-specific care is important to the long-term sustainability of our health care system and will better support patients who live with arthritis and other forms of chronic disease. Virtual care, its use during COVID-19 and lessons learned, should be incorporated into the planning of potential models of care and having the patient perspective is critical.

One urgent need for increased access to the above-mentioned model of care, is in rural and under-served areas. Those areas often have limited or no health care providers essential to

improve diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing management of the disease without relying on travelling clinics where there is little interaction with providers.

3. Ensure access to a range of arthritis treatment options

As there is currently no cure for arthritis, access to medications is critical for people living with arthritis. To manage their condition, people living with arthritis need access to their prescribed medications without financial, geographical, or administrative barriers or risk of shortages. The right treatment plan can significantly improve quality of life and allow people to lead near normal lives. Unfortunately, the reality is that many Canadians living with arthritis face significant barriers and challenges in accessing these necessary medications.

Pharmacological treatments are critical to the management of arthritis, which typically persists for many years, if not a lifetime. In the case of inflammatory arthritis, for example, treatments are still very much trial and error: what works for one person may not for another, and it's about finding the right treatment at the right time. A range of choices and solutions is therefore critical.

Medical cannabis is also an important pain management option for many people living with the fire of arthritis. About 1 in 4 Canadian adults using medical cannabis use it to manage arthritis, specifically. While cannabis for medical purposes requires a medical authorization by healthcare professional, it is subject to sales and excise taxes, which is inconsistent with the taxation of prescription drugs and medical necessities.

Exempting the provincial tax portion from the HST for medical cannabis would provide some financial relief for patients during this difficult time and underscore a clear and important distinction between medical versus recreational cannabis, paving the way for medical cannabis to be recognized and treated as medicine.

4. Support innovative solutions and research to help extinguish arthritis

We were pleased to see your government's investment of \$73 million towards the Alberta Technology and Innovation Strategy in the 2022-2023 Budget. As Canada's most common chronic condition that has no cure, there is an urgent need for innovative solutions to help those living with this debilitating condition. Arthritis Society Canada an [Innovation Strategy](#) with the purpose of creating transformational health change for Canadians living with arthritis and to accelerate the success of innovators working in this field. To date, the Strategy has awarded \$200,000 towards 4 innovative arthritis solutions through our Ideator Program have selected an innovative intervention through our Social Impact Program, and are funding 12 high-risk, high-

reward research projects representing a commitment of \$1.2 million through our new Ignite Innovation Grants.

We encourage the government to work with us to support innovative technologies and research to help improve the health of all Albertans, especially those living with the fire of arthritis.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we urge the Government of Alberta to implement our four key 2023 pre-Budget recommendations that will add cost-effective sustainability to the healthcare system and support a healthy population of Albertans.

About Arthritis Society Canada

Arthritis Society Canada is a national health charity dedicated to fighting the fire of arthritis with the fire of research, advocacy and information and support. With the support of our donors and volunteers, we are all in to end arthritis, so people with arthritis can live their best life free from arthritis. Arthritis Society Canada is accredited under Imagine Canada's Standards Program.

