



Opinion

Federal parties' long-term support vital to tackle frailty among older Canadians



Funding for science, research, robust data, and knowledge mobilization should be the basis of how we approach policy for older Canadians. *Photograph courtesy of Unsplash*

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BY DR. JOHN MUSCEDERE & RUSSELL WILLIAMS

They are the silent one million. Though unrecognized as a distinct group in our health care matrix, a large, increasing portion of Canada's population copes on a daily basis with frailty—a condition marked by chronic illness, multiple health problems, and poor health outcomes. For the first time, Canadians 65 years and older outnumber children, as revealed in the 2016 census. And the most rapidly growing segment of the population is individuals over 80 years old, 50 per cent of whom are considered "frail." Frailty increases vulnerability and results in loss of function across many bodily systems. For those living with frailty, minor infections and illnesses can have a dramatic impact, resulting in higher chances further deterioration in their overall health, increased risk of institutionalization and death.

Frailty puts pressure on health care budgets

How we care for older Canadians living with frailty or complex health needs is one of our most pressing national concerns. It impacts government budgets and priorities in significant ways as larger portions of health and social spending are devoted to Canadians in a frail condition. From a societal perspective, frailty also places huge

burdens—including financial, social and emotional costs—on family and friends functioning as caregivers.

And it takes away from efforts to improve Canada's economic efficiency, the key to building a strong economy.

Leveraging national research

As Canada's only network devoted to improving care for older adults living with frailty and to supporting their caregivers, the Canadian Frailty Network (CFN) leverages shared research, input from patients and citizens, and its training capacity to build knowledge bridges to all areas of Canadian healthcare.

We are committed to generating a fundamental shift in thinking and practice on the complex and vital requirements of older Canadians. To do so effectively requires a concerted, nationwide campaign to adapt health and social services in ways that break through the current patchwork quilt of understanding and support to provide sustainable and evidence-based care for this country's vulnerable older population.

There is no substitute for this approach. Given our changing demographics, there's also no time to lose.

Long-term commitment needed from federal parties

With an election on the horizon, it is crucial that our federal parties recognize the importance of this issue not only to seniors, but also to all Canadians.

CFN was funded in 2012 under the federal Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE). As a program that backs pan-Canadian, multi-disciplinary projects focused on issues of wide benefit to all, it was an ideal vehicle for frailty research.

It is imperative that federal leaders commit, during this election, to sustainable, long-term funding, which will allow CFN to move forward with its unique research on behalf of seniors, Indigenous people, and veterans living with frailty.

At present, frailty in older adults is under-recognized, under-documented, and under-coded in data from medical encounters, hospital discharge summaries, and death certificates. As a result, evaluating care, health outcomes and health care resource utilization by these older adults living with frailty are difficult, costly and time-consuming.

Lack of adequate treatment

Despite the high percentage of elderly Canadians living with frailty, many do not receive appropriate treatment—which not only worsens their quality of life but also puts significant strain on Canada's health care system. Although we do not have exact data on frailty alone, although 45 per cent of health care spending is devoted to those over the age of 65 they comprise 15 per cent of the population. Many Canadians over 65 receiving care are frail and frailty is associated with increased health care consumption. Better data would help.

Bringing together all necessary partners, the government can provide the leadership to bring together the many partners required to improve care for this vulnerable population. The first step in initiating a national discussion and the creation of national strategy would be to create a federal-provincial-territorial task force that will start the process of developing integrated care strategies of benefit to vulnerable Canadians, especially those coping with frailty. Improving care is not just a health care issue but encompasses public health approaches such as how we design our communities, how we promote exercise, how we increase access to nutritious foods in the elderly, and how we better integrate aging into our society.

Funding for science, research, robust data, and knowledge mobilization should be the basis of how we approach policy for older Canadians. Canada needs to create a frailty identification plan that is standardized and transferable across the health care system; upgrade and better organize health care and social service delivery to older

adults, and enhance advance care planning and end-of-life care.

Frailty more pronounced among Indigenous communities, veterans

The situation is particularly dire in Indigenous communities. Approximately 50 per cent of Indigenous people over 65 years are living with frailty—double the national average. By improving data collection in these communities, governments can help create frailty-sensitive health care and social services for Indigenous peoples (using the co-development model).

Another particularly vulnerable population is our veterans. A conservative estimate is that there are 30,000 frail veterans and this number will increase rapidly as veterans age. Older veterans' care needs stem from a lifetime of acquired disabilities, chronic diseases typical of older adults and psychosocial factors. A validated frailty index for use in the general Canadian older population should be adapted for use with veterans as an aid in designing federal policy and support programs.

Overall, with the number of Canadians living with frailty expected to exceed two million in the next decade, the need for effective strategies and funding to adequately address frailty is increasingly urgent.

Canada's federal parties should include in their election platforms a comprehensive strategy and funding plan to address the issue of complex aging. Innovative national funding programs which provide great synergistic advantages, are essential if we are to successfully tackle the dynamic, long-term issues raised by frailty while simultaneously doing a better job of caring for our aging population and managing the costs of caregiving.

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