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CAEP Statement Re: Universal Pharmacare

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In the upcoming 2019 federal election, the debate over national pharmacare could lead to the most important evolution of our healthcare system since the implementation of Medicare. The Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians (CAEP) strongly supports the creation of a universal pharmacare program, expanding the Canada Health Act to include public coverage of prescription medications.

As emergency physicians, we see the most vulnerable members of society, and we see the impact of unaffordable and inaccessible medications on our patients. When a person with diabetes cannot afford their insulin and begins rationing this life-sustaining medication, they often end up in the emergency department with acute complications of high blood sugar. Their health outcomes are worse and their costs to the system are higher than if they had access to the essential medicines they need. More than 400 working-aged Canadians die each year due to complications of diabetes, simply because they do not have adequate access to prescription medications. This is unacceptable.

Pharmacare is not a new topic in Canadian healthcare. When Tommy Douglas first envisioned Medicare in the 1940s, he intended that it would include universal medication coverage. Yet, today, Canada remains the only high-income nation in the world with a universal health care system that does not include prescription drug coverage. Instead, we rely on a perplexing patchwork of approximately 100 public drug plans and more than 100 000 private insurance plans to provide incomplete and inequitable access to medication. Canadians who don't qualify for these plans, whose needs exceed their plan's limitations, or whose marital or employment status changes, are left to fall through the cracks of this fragmented system.

Currently, 7.5 million Canadians either don't have coverage or have inadequate coverage for their prescription medication needs. Approximately 3 million Canadians don't fill their prescriptions every year because they can't afford them. One million Canadians have to cut spending on food and heat for their homes in order to afford their essential medicines. This results in inadequate treatment, greater complications from chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes, and greater mortality and morbidity.

A national pharmacare program is in the best interest of all Canadians. This is supported by a large body of robust research, which has repeatedly demonstrated that a national pharmacare program will improve access to essential medicines, reduce complications of inadequately treated diseases, and reduce costs for Canadian households and businesses. In 2017, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated that a universal pharmacare plan would save Canadians \$4.2 billion in annual prescription medication costs. This does not take into account the extensive cost-savings we would see in the healthcare system from reduced complications of chronic diseases, reduced hospital admissions, and

reduced emergency department visits; or the economic benefits of improved health and reduced sick leave among working Canadians.

In the past 60 years, there have been 5 separate national commissions on pharmacare, and each one has recommended that Canada's universal healthcare plan be expanded to include prescription drugs. The final report from the *Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare*, released in June 2019, came to the same conclusion. This report found that a "fill-in-the-gaps" approach to the current patchwork system would be ineffective, and would do little to improve access to prescription drugs for Canadians. Instead, it recommends a national pharmacare program that embodies the 5 fundamental principles of the Canada Health Act: universal, comprehensive, accessible, portable between provinces and territories, and publicly funded and administered. The report further outlines a strategy and timeline to enact such a program, which would have Canadians seeing the first benefits of pharmacare as early as January 2022.

Universal pharmacare is not only feasible, but rather an essential next step in order for us to uphold the values of the Canada Health Act. As emergency physicians, we see the complications of our current patchwork system first-hand, and we watch helplessly as our patients fall through the cracks. We believe that all Canadians, regardless of age, employment status, marital status, or income, should have equal and unobstructed access to the essential medications they need. Universal pharmacare is good public policy, good economic policy, and simply good common sense.

The Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians unequivocally supports the urgent implementation of a national pharmacare program, and urges every political candidate in the upcoming federal election to do the same.