

## **CAEP Position Statement on Sick Notes for Minor Illness**

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### **Executive Summary**

Employer mandated verification of minor illness leads patients to utilize healthcare resources solely to obtain a “sick note”. This puts unnecessary strain on the patient and the Emergency Department, and threatens to spread communicable diseases in our community.

The Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians advocates for a ban on sick note requirements by employers via federal or provincial legislation, and encourages patients with minor illnesses to stay at home and recover if they do not feel they require acute medical assessment.

### **The Impact of Sick Notes on Patients**

The World Health Organization and the Public Health Agency of Canada advise patients with the flu to stay home when sick<sup>1,2</sup>. Our patients agree: in a poll conducted on behalf of the Canadian Medical Association, 76% of Canadians believe people with minor illnesses should recover at home and 70% believe we should make it easier for sick people to avoid infecting others<sup>3</sup>.

But patients cannot follow this basic healthcare advice if they are required to get a sick note for work. Rather than encouraging patients with minor illnesses to recover at home, sick notes create unnecessary healthcare visits that cost the patient time and money. When one in ten Canadians (and up to a third of low-income households) are not able to afford their prescriptions<sup>4</sup>, the potential added financial burden of a sick note is a further barrier to healthcare. As a consequence, 82% of Canadians would go to work ill rather than get a sick note<sup>5</sup>, which undermines patient recovery and threatens public health.

### **The Impact of Sick Notes on Public health**

Sick notes encourage patients with infectious disease such as influenza or gastroenteritis to leave their home and visit their family doctor or emergency department (ED) purely for a piece of paper - which puts other patients at risk. In 2007, Doctors Nova Scotia asked large employers to stop the practice of requiring sick notes (and encouraged physicians to invoice the company for the cost of the note)<sup>6</sup>, and in 2014 the Ontario Medical Association called on employers to stop requiring sick notes because they drive patients with minor illnesses into waiting rooms and spread infections to more vulnerable patients.<sup>7</sup> In 2018 the Ontario government followed this medical advice and removed the ability for employers to ask for a sick note for minor illnesses. This decision was recently reversed against the advice of the Canadian Medical Association<sup>8</sup> and the Ontario Medical Association<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Impact of Sick Notes on Emergency Departments**

The Centers for Disease Control specifically advises against using the Emergency Department for minor cases of the flu<sup>10</sup>, but that is the unintended consequence of requiring sick notes. While such unnecessary visits by low acuity patients are not the cause of ED overcrowding<sup>11</sup>, they are an unnecessary use of healthcare resources at a time of strain and they expose other patients to harm. The ED includes the sickest and most vulnerable patients - including children, pregnant women, seniors, and immunocompromised patients - and a bureaucratic sick note demand places their lives at risk unnecessarily.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. Fact sheet on seasonal influenza.

[https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-\(seasonal\)](https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-(seasonal))

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. Flu (influenza): symptoms and treatment.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/flu-influenza.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos Reid. Staying home sick? Eight in ten (82%) employed Canadians would go to work sick if their employer required sick notes for minor illnesses. November 16, 2018.

<https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Canadians-oppose-ontario-government-plan-to-reinstate-sick-notes>

<sup>4</sup> Law MR. The effect of cost on adherence to prescription medications in Canada. CMAJ February 21, 2012. <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/184/3/297>

<sup>5</sup> Ipsos Reid

<sup>6</sup> Doctors Nova Scotia. Medical/sick notes. <https://doctorsns.com/contract-and-support/medical-sick-notes>

<sup>7</sup> Ontario Medical Association. Please stay home if you are sick: Ontario's Doctors. January 7, 2014 <https://www.oma.org/sections/news-events/news-room/all-news-releases/please-stay-home-if-you-are-sick-ontarios-doctors/>

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Medical Association. Statement—The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) urges the Ontario government not to reinstate sick notes for short-term illnesses.

November 16, 2018. <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/statement---the-canadian-medical-association-cma-urges-the-ontario-government-not-to-reinstate-sick-notes-for-short-term-illnesses-700668552.html>

<sup>9</sup> Ontario Medical Association. OMA Submission on Bill 47: Making Ontario Open for Business Act, 2018. November 2018 <https://www.oma.org/wp-content/uploads/Bill-47-Submission-OMA.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Flu: what to do if you get sick. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/treatment/takingcare.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Affleck A et al. Emergency department overcrowding and access block. CAEP position statement 2013. [https://caep.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/cjem\\_2013\\_overcrowding\\_and\\_access\\_block.pdf](https://caep.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/cjem_2013_overcrowding_and_access_block.pdf)