

# **A Healthy Nation is a Wealthy Nation**

**Remarks by Dr. Marlene Smadu  
President, Canadian Nurses Association**

**House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance  
October 5, 2006  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

*Final  
Check against delivery*

Thank you for the opportunity to outline the Canadian Nurses Association's vision for a stronger, healthier and wealthier Canada. My name is Marlene Smadu and I am the president of CNA, representing registered nurses from across the country.

Let me begin by saying that in 2006, the Conference Board of Canada noted that our country's ability to introduce and sustain public programs depends on having the resources that result from growing national wealth. However, in 2005 the Conference Board asserted that productivity is Canada's most significant economic weakness.

As president of CNA, I am here to outline how nurses from across the country can contribute to a policy conversation about productivity in the economy. We see the health of the nation as its most fundamental resource, and as such, a pillar of the Canadian economy, along with literacy, education, natural resources, the environment, and of course a robust technological and business infrastructure.

It is our belief that with the best economic performance in the G7 over several years – and with strong predictions for continued top-5 performance – Canada is positioned to improve public programs like medicare to support the health, and in turn the productivity and prosperity, of all Canadians. A healthy nation is a wealthy nation.

To support the health and wealth of all Canadians, the federal government can boost productivity by investing its leadership and resources in three key areas:

1. **Information management and communication technology**
2. **Human capital in the health human resources sector, and**
3. **Reducing disparities and enhancing the employability of Canadians**

Taken together, all of these areas for action can improve timely access to quality care for all Canadians now – and re-direct the Canadian health system toward a different, stronger future. Every national review of the Canadian health-care system has supported the need for investment in all these areas, and many gaps remain.

## **Investing in tools: *Boosting productivity through technology***

To improve access to the health system, the federal government should focus its attention on information and communications technology in health care, which some say is as much as 10 years behind other industries such as banking.

### **CNA recommends that the federal government:**

- **Accelerate the implementation of information management and communication technology to support the coordinated and coherent delivery of health services.**
- **Ensure that every Canadian has access to the most suitable technology (e.g., broadband) that will allow them to link to the Internet, from our largest urban centres to the most isolated northern communities.**
- **Ensure that every Canadian has a personal electronic health record within the next five years.**

## **Investing in health professionals: *Boosting productivity through human capital***

Looming shortages of health professionals in many disciplines are now global in nature. The U.S. alone projects a shortage of some one million nurses by 2012, posing a serious threat to the Canadian health-care system by virtue of its economic clout and consequent ability to draw nurses south.

We are keenly aware of the jurisdictional authority in the delivery of health-care services. But as many have noted, the federal government still has an important policy role to play to help direct workforces from low to high productivity.

Consider the following three points:

- Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador regularly lose as much as 30 per cent of their nursing graduates to other provinces.
- The federal government is the fifth largest employer of nurses in this country.
- Federal power includes immigration.

Currently, employers all across Canada are competing for the same, relatively small pool of nurses and doctors. And education policies are not well linked with employment and immigration policies. In the area of human resources, the federal government can and must play a critical role by representing all Canadians and the health-care system on the global stage.

The 2006 speech from the throne committed the government to “ensuring Canadians get the health care they have paid for.” The Canadian Nurses Association recognizes that getting “what you need” may be different from getting what you “have paid for.” This distinction is clear in the original vision of medicare – that Canadians should have access to necessary health services.

The federal government must focus its leadership on developing an integrated pan-Canadian health human resources strategy.

**CNA therefore recommends that the federal government:**

- **Lead the development of a standard framework for calculating needs in the health sector with an initial investment of \$5 million.**
- **Invest \$10 million in a mechanism to promote and facilitate pan-Canadian health human resources planning. Such a mechanism would build on existing networks and databases, provide analytical support to all levels of government, and link health human resources planners, educational institutions, employers and health professionals.**
- **Re-invest in its commitment to nursing research. A critical component of the federal science and knowledge agenda includes health and health-services research conducted by and about nurses. The initial \$25 million, 10-year investment in the**

**Nurse Fund will expire in 2008, leaving a significant gap in funding opportunities for nursing research. The federal government should put structures in place now to establish a reliable, long-term research agenda involving nurses, which will provide the evidence base to move forward on transformational changes in health services delivery that lie ahead for all health professionals.**

### **Investing in Canadians: *Boosting productivity by reducing disparities***

Looking beyond the health-care system, the federal government must focus on the issue of the employability of Canadians. To improve productivity through employment and employability, Canada needs to foster innovation, and particularly to focus on improving literacy and strengthening knowledge skills.

Beyond literacy, in every study conducted, outcomes for Canada's Aboriginal Peoples and visible minorities on many measures often stand out in stark and negative contrast to those of Canada's historic majority population. In some cases the same holds true for Canada's women and children.

It should be encouraging to governments to know that there *are* concrete actions they can lead to reduce disparities.

The Canadian Nurses Association supports the federal government's efforts to eliminate fiscal disparities across the country. We urge you now to make the same strong commitment to reducing the health and social disparities that continue to drive those fiscal imbalances.

### **CNA therefore recommends that the federal government:**

- **Continue to invest in its Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program**
- **Accelerate development and implementation of a national pharmaceuticals strategy**
- **Invest an initial sum of \$10 million to establish an action-oriented, pan-Canadian program to eliminate ethnic, gender and racial disparities in Canada**

**by 2020. The government's focus must include broad human rights and equity, including timely access to health care and good health outcomes, housing, safe water, employment and equitable treatment in the criminal justice system.**

- *We understand this is a generation-long, transformational initiative. We also recognize that resolving these historic imbalances will determine the quality of life for all Canadians. Taking on this troubling problem would position the federal government as a global leader, and as the seat of transformation for the future of Canada.*

## **CONCLUSION**

The federal government has important responsibilities in areas of health such as emergency preparedness, food and drug safety, supporting national disease strategies (e.g., diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS) and helping to build a strong pan-Canadian workforce of health-care providers. Some of these responsibilities are defined in legislation, including the *Canada Health Act*.

The strong leadership of the federal government in all of these areas is what assures the current and future health status of Canadians.