

ISSUE ONE: CANCER CARE – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 2024

The current situation

Alberta's cancer care system delivers some of the best treatments and care options in Canada but is dangerously overloaded and under-resourced. Right now, it takes up to 13 weeks to be assessed by a radiation oncologist and up to eight weeks to be assessed by a medical oncologist at Alberta's cancer centres. Only 60% of the top five cancer surgeries (bladder, colorectal, breast, lung and prostate) are performed within Alberta's recommended target time. Approximately one in two Albertans will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, and cancer remains the leading cause of death in Alberta. A Canadian study has shown that delaying cancer treatment by four weeks can increase a person's risk of dying by 6 to 13%.

What got us here

Many factors have contributed to this crisis, including advances in cancer care treatments, such as targeted therapies, that have resulted in better survival rates and improved lives. Nearly two-thirds of treated patients survive at least five years and a growing number may be cured of their cancer. While this is our goal, these improved outcomes require ongoing comprehensive cancer care, which relies on having skilled oncologists available. The number of oncologists practicing in Alberta rose from 102 in 2013 to 122 in 2022, an increase of unfortunately only 20%. The number of new cancer cases diagnosed each year in Alberta rose by 40% over the same period. Oncologists are working harder and longer to manage as many cancer patients as possible, resulting in exhaustion, burnout and low morale. Our province is struggling to attract graduates from Alberta radiation oncology and medical oncology training programs and has lost experienced oncologists to other provinces and countries. Low salaries and high workloads are behind these recruitment and retention challenges.

Limited physical space also makes it hard to deliver timely care. While the opening of the new Arthur J.E. Child Comprehensive Cancer Centre in Calgary (anticipated later this year) will significantly enhance Alberta's cancer care services for the southern part of the province, Edmonton's Cross Cancer Institute is now overcapacity and unable to add more clinic space to see more patients or add more office space to hire additional oncologists.

All of these challenges are exacerbated by a population boom that is expected to see Alberta reach 5 million residents by the end of 2024. Our population is also aging. As of September 30, 2022, more than 725,000 Albertans were over the age of 65 – a number that is expected to double by 2042. While cancer can occur at any age, the incidence of cancer rises dramatically in the later stage of life. Estimates for 2023 suggest that 23,200 new cancer cases were diagnosed in Alberta, up 40% from 16,600 new cancer diagnoses in 2013. The estimated number of new cancer cases in Alberta is projected to increase by 29% from 2020 to 2030 and by 56% from 2020 to 2040.

Workforce shortages in other areas of Alberta's health care system have a measurable impact on cancer care. Albertans are waiting longer to see a primary care doctor to assess the signs and symptoms of cancer, to have tests performed to determine if there is cancer present, for surgery that is essential to their care and, ultimately, to receive life-saving cancer care treatments. Until we fix the provider shortages in both primary and acute care, and increase our cancer care workforce, we can't address cancer care wait times, improve cancer-related investigations and tests, and deliver the treatments and care Albertans need and deserve.

What needs to happen

Alberta desperately needs more oncologists and must invest in strategic, proactive recruiting in the way that provinces such as Ontario and BC have done. Without a comprehensive cancer care plan we won't be able to care for the patients who need us now or the many more who will need us tomorrow. Alberta can't afford to let this problem get worse.

Resources

Supports for people with cancer
www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/cca/if-cca-getting-help.pdf

Cancer Care Alberta
www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/cca/if-cca-infographic.pdf

Indigenous cancer care
www.albertahealthservices.ca/cancer/Page16319.aspx

Future of cancer impact in Alberta
www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/about/scn/ahs-scn-cancer-future-of-cancer-impact-summary.pdf

Cancer Research & Analytics
www.albertahealthservices.ca/cancer/Page17359.aspx

Cancer Types
cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-types

Coping with changes
cancer.ca/en/living-with-cancer/coping-with-changes

Life after treatment
cancer.ca/en/living-with-cancer/life-after-treatment

Your child has cancer
cancer.ca/en/living-with-cancer/your-child-has-cancer

That was then.

Only 15 years ago, there was just a single indication for treatment with immune checkpoint inhibitor therapy.

Fewer than 10% of treated patients diagnosed with malignant melanoma survived two years or more.

A decade ago, there were 16,600 cancer cases diagnosed in Alberta with 102 practicing oncologists providing cancer care to Albertans.

This is now.

There are now 33 unique treatment indications using immune checkpoint inhibitor therapy for cancer patients.

Two-thirds of treated patients in 2023 survived at least five years – and a proportion of these patients may be cured of their cancer.

Ten years later, the estimated number of cancer cases diagnosed in Alberta is 23,300 – an increase of 40% – with 122 practising oncologists providing cancer care to Albertans – an increase of only 20%.