



Addressing the Medical Imaging Dilemma in Canada: Restoring Timely Access for Patients Post-Pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dire effect on wait times for medical imaging procedures across the country. Canadians who may have postponed diagnostic and necessary follow-up imaging early in the pandemic are now in more urgent need of care. This has created a massive influx of patients attempting to reschedule their appointments, not to mention the additional treatment that will be required for those undiagnosed or with worsening conditions. This demand, along with capacity limitations in radiology departments, and the growing baseline demand for medical imaging will combine to cripple our healthcare system if we do not take action.

Status of Medical Imaging in Canada

Excessive Wait Times

Prior to the pandemic, Canadians were waiting an average of 50 to 82 days for CT scans and 89 days for MRI imaging. This is 20 to 52 days longer than the recommended 30-day wait time.ⁱ Due to COVID-19, waitlists are even longer, putting Canada in crisis mode for medical imaging. A recent CAR member survey indicated that 75% of radiologists across the country have not been able to reduce the backlog for medical imaging. Further, 30% of radiologists believe that wait times for medical imaging will never return to pre-pandemic levels. This is especially concerning for individuals needing breast and colorectal cancer screening, patients undergoing cancer treatment,

or those who may need imaging but have delayed seeking care due to fears or factors associated with the pandemic.

Future Demand

In 2019 the Conference Board of Canada estimated that average wait times in 2022 would be **67 days for a CT** and **133 days for an MRI**, far exceeding the acceptable 30-day standard, **resulting in a net loss to the economy of \$3.5 billion in lost GDP.**ⁱⁱ

With nearly 80% of the Canadian population vaccinated, radiology departments across the country are seeing a massive influx of patients attempting to reschedule their appointments. These wait times are alarming to radiologists, who want to provide lifesaving procedures and imaging for their patients in a timely fashion, and for patients who are waiting in uncertainty for imaging care.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How will a federal investment in medical imaging benefit Canadians?



It would reduce wait times and improve access to diagnostic and interventional procedures, improving overall patient outcomes.

Why is investment in medical imaging equipment needed now?



Canadian imaging equipment is undersupplied. We are at a 20-year low for investment in new imaging equipment. The average Canadian waits between 50-82 days for CT and up to 89 days for MRI/ This is 20-52 days longer than recommended by Canadian Wait time Alliance and supported by the CAR. This has been further amplified by COVID-19.

Healthcare is a provincial priority, why ask for a federal investment?



The health and well-being of Canadians is a national priority. Investing in medical imaging via the Canada Health Transfer will ensure that Canadians have fair and equitable access to imaging procedures. In 2005, the Government invested in imaging equipment to help tackle the lengthy wait times.

Our healthcare system is not equipped to handle these volumes; we are at risk of leaving many patients undiagnosed and treated.

Economic Strain on the Healthcare System

If the ongoing service disruption created by COVID-19 results in even a 25% reduction in overall patient throughput, the impact on the economy is an additional billion dollars in lost GDP due to people being unable to

About the Canadian Association of Radiologists

The Canadian Association of Radiologists (CAR) is the national voice for radiologists in Canada, dedicated to imaging excellence and advocating for the highest standard of patient care across the country. We represent 2,800 radiologists who provide vital medical imaging for millions of patients.

References

- i Sutherland, Greg, Nigel Russell, Robyn Gibbard, and Alexandru Dobrescu. The Value of Radiology, Part II. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2019.
- ii *Ibid.*

Bringing Wait Times to an Acceptable Standard

To address the significant backlog for medical imaging and adequately prepare for the influx of patients in the healthcare system, the Canadian Association of Radiologists recommends that the Government act on the following priorities:

1. A federal investment of **\$1.5 billion** over five years in medical imaging equipment and health human resources to support the increased capacity.
2. Support the implementation of a **national e-referrals program (Clinical Decision Support)** to provide referring health professionals with better access to medical imaging guidelines, ensuring that patients receive the right test at the right time.
3. The creation of a **National Data Science Institute** to harness AI for the strategic prioritization of health human resources, technology, and infrastructure for medical imaging in the wake of the pandemic and beyond.

We need to act now by investing in medical imaging to support the influx of referrals, while tackling waitlists. Improvements to healthcare system capacity are truly an investment in patient care that will facilitate our long-term economic recovery from the pandemic.

Recommended Yearly Investment – Medical Imaging Equipment



Stagnant Growth Trend in CT Units

CT Machines, total units and annual increase in units, 1990-2017 *Source: Conference Board, CADTH and CIHI*

