



## Prescription for northern Ontario

Ontario's doctors know that Ontarians want – and deserve – a better health-care system. The current system is plagued by physician shortages, long wait times, a serious backlog of services, inadequate mental health and addiction programs and insufficient home and community care, among other problems.

Nowhere are the issues more critical than in northern Ontario. This important region makes up almost 90 per cent of Ontario's landmass but contains only six per cent of its population. Equitable access to health care in northern Ontario is a unique challenge, requiring unique solutions.

That is why the Ontario Medical Association, representing Ontario's 43,000 doctors, has developed a plan entitled *Prescription for Northern Ontario* with 12 recommendations to address those challenges.

The northern plan of action is part of a larger master plan, *Prescription for Ontario: Doctors' 5-Point Plan for Better Health Care*, which provides 75 provincewide recommendations for implementation over the next four years. The plan is the result of the largest consultation in the OMA's 140-year history.

Ontario's doctors have been speaking out about the gaps in health-care services – especially in northern Ontario – for years. But the COVID-19 pandemic has made these gaps more visible and the need for solutions more urgent.

Our consultation on the future of the health-care system took place over the spring and summer of 2021. More than 1,600 physicians and physician leaders provided their expert advice. We listened to associations and individuals representing hospitals, nurses and many other health-care professionals, health charities and patient advocacy groups, health sciences and

technology companies, municipal and business sectors, labour unions and social service agencies and non-profit organizations serving clients of all demographics and in every part of the province.

We also heard from almost 8,000 Ontarians in 600 communities through our public survey at [betterhealthcare.ca](http://betterhealthcare.ca). More than half of those who responded to the OMA survey in northern Ontario said the way health care is delivered in their community had become worse as a result of the pandemic.

Wait times and the need for more doctors were identified across the north as the top health care priorities.

When asked to grade the local health care system on a scale of A, B, C or F, more than half of respondents to the survey across northern Ontario, in communities from Sudbury to Thunder Bay, gave it a C and more than a quarter gave it a failing grade.

To help develop the northern section of the plan, we also held a round table with northern physicians, a separate round table with community leaders from across the north

representing different sectors and held one-on-one discussions with northern physician leaders.

The survey results and input from northern leaders clearly show that we need to focus on a multi-stakeholder solution for northern disparities in health care.

There is a shortage of doctors and health-care professionals in many northern communities, especially in specialties such as family medicine, emergency medicine and anesthesia. Moreover, physical access to care and services is often hampered by weather, transportation infrastructure and sheer distance. However, access to health care ensures healthy populations, which is crucial to the economic health and vibrancy of rural and remote communities.

Virtual care is limited by lack of high-speed internet and unreliable connectivity. It's also hard to stay healthy when access to transportation, affordable food and secure housing are so limited. The social determinants of health – factors such as income, education, food security and housing – must be addressed, especially in the north.



To improve health care in northern Ontario,

# Ontario's doctors recommend:

**01** \_\_\_\_\_

That patients have equitable access to care in their own communities

**02** \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewing and updating incentives and supports for physicians and allied health-care workers to practise in northern Ontario and other communities that are chronically underserved

**03** \_\_\_\_\_

Focusing on education, training, innovation and opportunities for collaborative care to address physician (health-provider) shortages in remote communities

**04** \_\_\_\_\_

Creating resourced opportunities for specialist and subspecialist trainees to undertake electives and core rotations in the north

**05** \_\_\_\_\_

Giving medical students and residents the skills and opportunities they need to be confident in choosing rural and remote practices

**06** \_\_\_\_\_

Focusing on innovative culturally sensitive education and training opportunities addressing physician and other health-provider shortages in rural and remote communities

# 07

## Focusing on

the profound and disproportionate impact of the opioid crisis and mental health issues in northern Ontario

# 08

## More social workers,

mental health and addiction care providers and resources for children's mental health

# 09

## Enhancing internet connectivity

in remote areas to support virtual care, keeping in mind that virtual care will not solve health human resources problems in northern Ontario and should not replace in-person care

# 10

## A recognition of

the specific need for local access to culturally safe and linguistically appropriate health care for northern Ontario's francophone population and Indigenous Peoples

# 11

## A collaborative partnership

with Indigenous Services Canada and Health Canada to address issues of safe drinking water and adequacy of health-care facilities and resources in Indigenous communities

# 12

## Using a harm-reduction,

anti-oppressive lens, addressing the education gaps in Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities, as health is directly affected by education

Here is what two northern Ontario doctors and a northern mayor told us about the challenges their communities face:

Rx

PATIENT NAME Ontario

*“Social isolation of Indigenous communities in the north, and the inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples, have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Our inequity bathtub in northern Ontario was nine-tenths full before COVID, and now it is overflowing.”*

Dr. Sarita Verma, president of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine

Rx

PATIENT NAME Ontario

*“Ontario’s large geographical and cultural nature presents a challenge for health-care leadership. Nowhere is the challenge greater than in northern Ontario. Fortunately, Ontario has the right people and resources to meet the challenge of building a world leading health-care system that is equitable, effective and accessible. Though progress has been made, Ontario still has much left to do, especially in northern Ontario.”*

Dr. Stephen Cooper, family physician, Manitoulin Island

Fixing physician shortages is an issue everywhere in the province but nowhere is it as urgent as in remote communities and northern Ontario. Without access to doctors, many patients needlessly worry and suffer. We need robust data about our physician workforce and we need to use that data wisely to plan for our future population needs. We also need to support doctors so that all patients can get equitable and timely access to the care they need.

“

**Northern Ontario is growing and it is also aging. We are in crisis mode without the complement of physicians required. And I believe that communities need to be able to engage medical students, residents and locums to show them that there is so much more to a community than what they see at the clinic/hospital where they are working. It takes a community to engage our visiting med students, residents and physicians so they will come back and possibly stay!**

Sally Hagman, mayor of Blind River

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To address the unequal supply and distribution of doctors,

# Ontario's doctors recommend:

## 01

Creating a detailed analysis, based on high-quality data, that accounts for the types and distribution of doctors to meet population needs

## 02

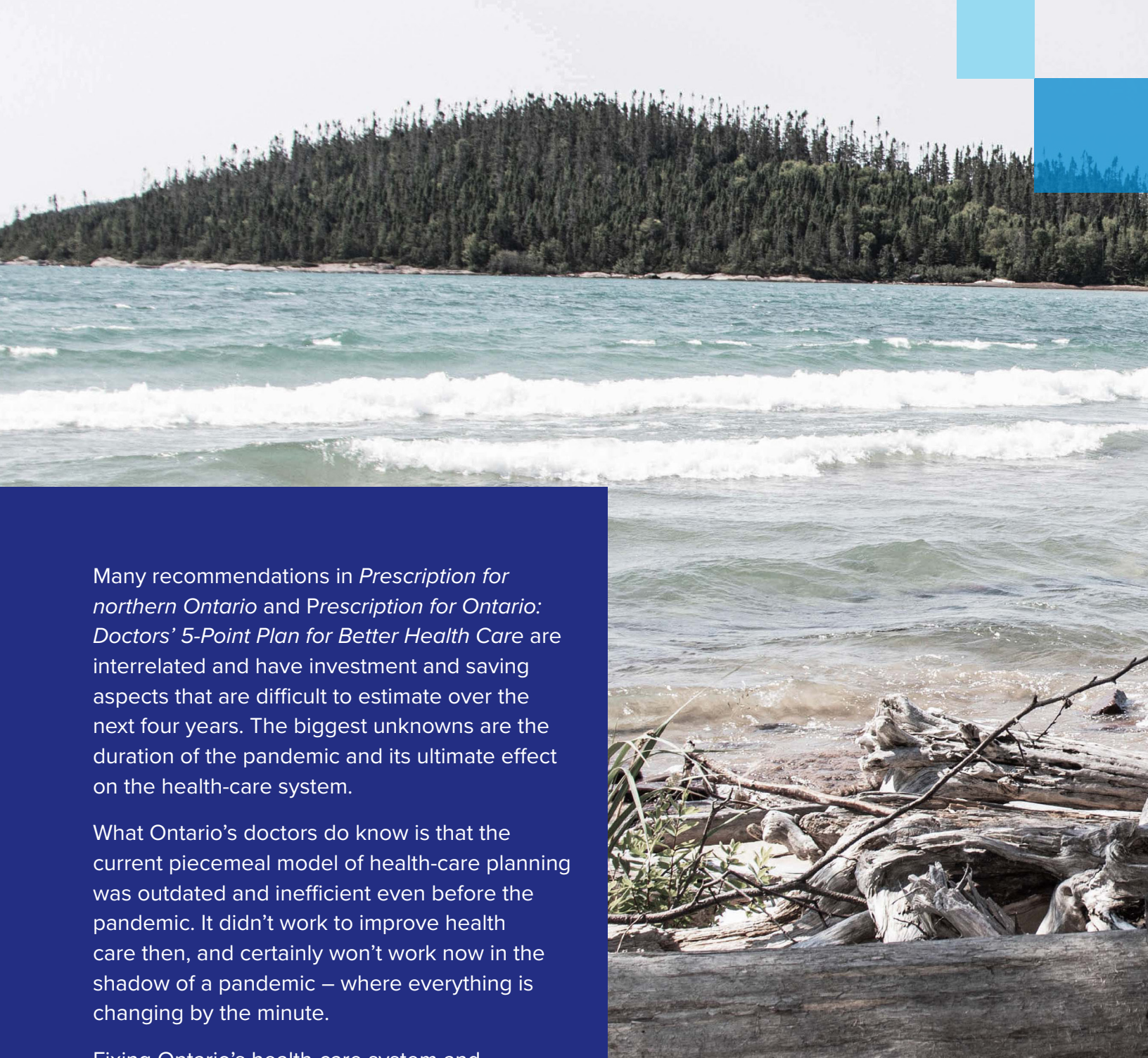
Establishing a set of best practices around physician supports to help ensure Ontario has the right doctors in the right places at the right times

## 03

Using best evidence regarding forecasted population need, increasing the number of medical student and residency positions

## 04

Supporting students from remote, rural and racialized communities to go to medical school aligned with populations in need



Many recommendations in *Prescription for northern Ontario* and *Prescription for Ontario: Doctors' 5-Point Plan for Better Health Care* are interrelated and have investment and saving aspects that are difficult to estimate over the next four years. The biggest unknowns are the duration of the pandemic and its ultimate effect on the health-care system.

What Ontario's doctors do know is that the current piecemeal model of health-care planning was outdated and inefficient even before the pandemic. It didn't work to improve health care then, and certainly won't work now in the shadow of a pandemic – where everything is changing by the minute.

Fixing Ontario's health-care system and addressing the gaps in health-care service in northern Ontario will not be quick or easy. It will require collaboration among health providers, support from the public, and political will.

**We have to act now.**



Ontario Medical Association

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