

June 15, 2012

Hon. Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
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Dear Minister,

Public Health Physicians of Canada is a national association of medical officers at all levels of government. We are writing to express our deep concern over your department's April 25th announcement to reduce and limit the health insurance coverage for refugees and refugee claimants under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), effective June 30.

Local public health agencies in Canada understand that the IFHP is a means to ensure health standards for a temporary period of time for refugees and refugee claimants who are individuals fleeing political, social, or other forms of persecution. These newcomers are among the most vulnerable populations in our communities. Many have experienced persecution and trauma in their home country. This population experiences greater rates of mental health problems as a consequence of their forced displacement and prolonged separation from family and supports. If they believe that health care is not available to them, they will most likely delay or avoid seeking care.

Although the reductions purport to allow for access in the case of public health risk, we are not convinced that this will actually be the case. Individuals will not know if their symptoms constitute a public health risk, and will likely not seek care if they cannot afford to pay. For the most part, these individuals have no other means of purchasing health benefits for themselves or their families and may not understand the nuances of the proposed coverage. Furthermore, failure to address important health concerns including vision and dental care early will make it much more difficult for newcomers to acquire the skills necessary to learn Canada's languages, go to school or enter the job market. **We would request that the date be deferred to permit objective evaluation on the impact and inclusion of providers such as ourselves in the dialogue prior to any action being taken.**

We are concerned that this purported cost-savings measure will actually do more harm than good and will potentially cost our society much more than it would save. Delaying access to diagnosis and treatment may have lifelong implications for the individual, and may also lead to

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significant costs if illnesses are not prevented or actually deteriorate over the duration of the refugee's hearing and determination of eligibility. Visits to hospital emergency departments are expensive and inappropriate uses of health care services that create financial hardship for the patient and increase costs for provinces and territories. We are aware that sometimes adjudications can be delayed or that security clearances may stall the process and that this can prolong the period without access to health care.

We are asking that the same standards for health care access that we expect for all members of our Canadian society be extended to refugees. We are extremely concerned over the health impacts that this decision will have on the most vulnerable members of our society, many of whom will eventually become Canadian citizens, leading to negative repercussions for both individuals as well as the public. The cuts to the IFHP are unwarranted and counterproductive. In order to help ensure the health and well-being of Canadian society's vulnerable populations, and in order to uphold Canadian principles of compassion and inclusiveness, we ask that your government revise or rescind this policy announcement. Not only will preventive care be eliminated for all refugee categories, people from "Designated Countries of Origin" (DCO) will receive no care at all, even in emergency situations. There is no other group in our society for whom we deny access to all health care. We do not believe that it is ethical to single out refugees as being undeserving of basic health care services and dental and vision care equivalent to what is available through most provincial low-income assistance programs. It is even less acceptable to deny all care for refugee claimants from DCOs, given that the DCO category does not take into account individual circumstances.

Our association believes that policies for medically treating refugees should be based on fairness and sound public health policy. The planned changes meet neither of these criteria. Thank you for taking the time to review this letter.

Yours truly,

Original signed by

Rosana Pellizzari, MD, MSc, CCFP, FRCPC

on behalf of

Maura Ricketts, MD, MHSc, FRCPC

Council President, Public Health Physicians of Canada

cc: Hon. Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of Health
Dr. David Butler-Jones, Chief Public Health Officer
Libby Davies, NDP Health Critic
Hon. Hedy Fry, Liberal Health Critic
André Bellavance, Bloc Critic Santé

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