



**Addressing Health Human Resource Issues in
Diagnostic Medical Imaging – Sonography**

Pre-Budget Submission for the 2024-25 Federal Budget

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The federal government should create a national health human resources strategy akin to 2007's "Pan-Canadian Health Human Resources Strategy". This plan should emphasize:
 - a. Collecting nationwide data about trends affecting the profession through cooperation with the provinces.
 - b. Recruitment and retention of health professionals including diagnostic medical sonographers
 - c. Streamlining credentialing and licensing processes to encourage health work force mobility, including diagnostic medical sonographers, across Canada.
2. Invest in mental health resources for sonographers combatting burnout.
3. Invest in the development and implementation of a comprehensive bridging program that supports internationally trained health care professionals to become sonographers in Canada.

About Sonography Canada

Sonography Canada represents over 6,500 practicing diagnostic medical sonographers across Canada. These highly skilled professionals are a vital part of the care economy and consistently deliver improved health outcomes for Canadians, from diagnosis through patient care. Sonography Canada is the national credentialing body for sonographers across the country, ensuring practitioners who hold a credential in sonography have met a high, nationally consistent standards of patient care. Sonography Canada advocates on behalf of its members to ensure they have the supports necessary to deliver the high standard of diagnostic imaging care that Canadians expect and deserve.

Introduction

First-class health care in Canada is the result of collaborative effort between multiple medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, lab technicians, and diagnostic imaging professionals. Sonography, the practice of using diagnostic ultrasound as a medical investigation to assess organs, tissues, and blood flow inside the body, is a key part of discerning and diagnosing medical issues. Despite the critical role of sonographers in a complete medical model, the sector continues to face severe challenges relating to worker burnout, as well as recruitment and retention of sonography professionals.

Burnout among healthcare workers

The impacts of burnout on healthcare workers over the course of the pandemic are well-documented and linger today. Canadian sonographers report being “stretched thin” and experiencing burnout at a level never seen before. As seen in other professions across the care economy, many sonographers report taking on fewer patients, leaving the profession altogether due to burnout placing additional burden on those who remain, and just as importantly, report being unable to provide clinical placement and training to student sonographers which only further decreases capacity.

In 2021 and again in 2023, results of Sonography Canada’s Mental Health Survey found that 56% of sonographers felt overextended to the point of emotional exhaustion, an increase of 33.3% from 2018. There was also a 34.3% increase in the number of sonographers who were somewhat to very likely looking for a new job with a different employer in the next year.

Sonography Canada is aware that solving this crisis will take time. Increasing supports for experienced, practicing sonographers will help to retain the current workforce. At the same time, it will expand capacity for training the sonographers of the future.

Increasing recruitment and retention and identifying new pathways to expand our workforce are important to support an aging population that will need more care and attention.

As Canada works to solve labour shortages through targeted immigration, it is critical we expand bridging and support for internationally trained healthcare professionals qualified to work as sonographers in Canada, to accelerate their accreditation and acclimation to Canadian practice while ensuring a continued high standard of competence.

Sonography Canada has three recommendations for the federal government to begin to address the human resources crisis among sonographers in Budget 2024-25, making proactive investments to ensure future generations of Canadians will be able to continue to access the timely, high-quality diagnostic resources and medical care they need.

Addressing the Health Human Resources Crisis through a National Health Human Resources Action Plan

The staffing issues affecting sonography and other health care professions are dire, widespread and complex. There are varied impacts of staff shortages across Canadian jurisdictions, and none of them are positive. It is vital that Canada develops a coordinated national framework that involves the provinces and the federal government, rather than a piecemeal, province-by-province approach. This level of collaboration is well precedented. In 2005, Health Canada published *A Framework for Collaborative Pan-Canadian Health Human Resources Planning*. That framework was informed by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Health Delivery and Human Resources. Though healthcare is a provincial responsibility, the federal government has an integral role to play in funding and development of accompanying guidelines and standards.

In 2007, Health Canada published the *Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Strategy*. Since that time, many health organizations, including Sonography Canada have been calling on the federal government to establish a new strategy, but nothing has happened in 16 years. It is no wonder that Canada stands in the midst of a significant health human resources challenge. Previous work done by governments working together show that there is a pathway to addressing these concerns, but the missing piece is political will.

Sonography Canada believes that the federal government should use its resources to create a national health human resources strategy that prioritizes recruitment, retention and training in an array of healthcare fields.

The creation of a national strategy would require cooperation across and consultation with provinces, as well as data collection and sharing by provinces and territories. Statistics Canada and Health Canada are well-placed to partner on this initiative to create improved, regionally specific Labour Market Information (LMI) for Canadian healthcare.

Through partnerships with organizations like Sonography Canada, this strategy would also provide an opportunity for those working in the care economy to compile and share data from within their respective province or territory, contributing to a more accurate "big picture" of the challenges, gaps and opportunities in medical diagnostics and sonography across Canada.

Collaborating with provinces, territories, healthcare providers and organizations with expertise in the healthcare field to address the health human resource crisis would alleviate many of the recruitment, retention and overwork challenges faced across our sector, while charting a clear and innovative path forward for those working in the care economy – including sonographers.

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The federal government should create a national health human resources action plan akin to 2007's "Pan-Canadian Health Human Resources Strategy". This plan should emphasize:

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Combatting Workplace Burnout Among Sonography Professionals

Burnout is commonplace amongst health professionals, and but the effects of burnout were not as pronounced as during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This mental health crisis is often referred to as the “shadow pandemic”.

For sonographers, this was especially true. The very nature of their work requires that sonographers work in close proximity to their patients. During the pandemic, sonographers did not have the option to work via telehealth. These added stressors have had cumulative effects that are now being seen in staffing shortages, threats to employee retention and limitations on clinical training for the next generation of sonographers. Left untreated, workplace burnout will hobble the capacity of the healthcare economy to grow and thrive.

Addressing the human resources health crisis in the sonography field requires acknowledging and addressing the mental health issues that continue to plague the profession. This is a cyclical problem. A lack of qualified staff and increased demand creates more pressure on sonographers, who in turn suffer burnout, forcing some to leave the profession, which exacerbates the lack of qualified staff.

Health Canada and the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions should work with health professions like sonographers, as well as provincial health authorities, to develop a comprehensive strategy to address workplace mental health. It will take years to solve the human resources challenges we face, but the pressure it places on diagnostic medical sonographers' health will persist. These resources are essential to supporting current sonographers, and demonstrating a commitment to those who wish to join the profession.

Being well-supported can only create a healthy workplace which impacts the entire healthcare process in a positive way, from the development of trainees to the recruitment and retention of experienced sonographers which will reduce the delays that contribute to surgery backlogs and long wait times.

Recommendation 2:

Invest in mental health resources for sonographers combatting burnout and departure from the profession.

Making Canada a Viable Destination for Internationally Trained Sonographers

As Canada works to achieve ambitious population growth targets over the years ahead, immigration is also a means of combatting staffing shortages across key sectors like health care. Given recent changes to the Express Entry program and targeted immigration strategies, now is the time to focus on recruiting internationally trained sonographers and other medical professionals to immigrate to Canada.

Sonography is practiced differently around the world. In many countries, sonography is performed by physicians who have the essential skills to become sonographers in Canada, should they wish to do so. With the fundamental skills in place, most only need to familiarize themselves with Canadian practice standards and acclimate to the Canadian health care system for success.

Maintaining a high, standardized level of competency should be our top priority to ensure quality care in our medical system. At the same time, it is important we do not make immigrants who have valuable skills in health care, start from scratch if they have already earned international credentials. We must invest in mechanisms that identify bridging, retraining or upskilling needs to enter the Canadian workforce and to provide support in navigating the system (and Canadian society) while doing so. Bridging programs and specialized training are important, as transitional training can mean the difference between success in the job that an immigrant has trained for in their home country and having to find a different job for survival.

Sonography Canada encourages the federal government to invest in bridging programs and support programs that ensure qualified immigrants can become professional sonographers through targeted training that prepares them to be credentialed and/or licensed in Canada. As such, we recommend the federal government invest to streamline the training process for those who have either the requisite training or the adjacent training internationally.

Sustainably addressing the health human resource crisis requires ensuring a greater number of individuals see sonography as a viable career path, while also ensuring quality of newly trained and hired sonographers. Practitioners in other countries seek to come to Canada. We need their skills, and we need to make it

easy for them to share them. Building out supports that smooth the transition to Canadian practice and society is an important step that is worth investing in.

Recommendation 3:

Invest in bridging programs and supports for internationally trained healthcare professionals who are trained to work as sonographers.