

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## Long wait times in oncology results in worsening patient outcomes

### Alberta's delays are among the highest in Canada

Over 40% of Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, a number that continues to rise due to an aging population. Despite the increasing need for timely cancer care, Alberta's health care system is facing significant challenges in meeting this demand. Currently, the wait time to see an oncologist in Alberta has increased to 13 weeks – far exceeding the province's four-week target.

While long wait times are a nationwide concern, Alberta's delays are among the highest in Canada. Research shows that even a four-week delay in starting cancer treatment can lead to a 6% to 13% increase in mortality. For palliative patients, these delays may also reduce the time they have to spend with loved ones. With cancer diagnoses expected to continue rising, addressing this growing burden is essential for ensuring timely care and positive outcomes.

### Efforts to address the oncology shortage

The provincial government has taken steps to address the shortage of oncologists by increasing training seats, recruiting physicians from other provinces and abroad, and expanding clinic hours for existing oncologists. These initiatives are critical for managing the growing caseload, but they are only part of the solution.

One key area that hasn't received as much attention is generating interest in oncology among medical students. Encouraging more students to consider oncology is essential for ensuring that future training positions are filled and that the workforce can meet the increasing demand.

### The role of medical student engagement in oncology

At the University of Alberta, medical school is delivered in a block system with the second to last block focused on oncology. Similarly, at the University of Calgary there are several months of the curriculum set aside to teach about oncology, highlighting the importance of this area within medicine. However, the effort to engage students often ends when the basics are covered in the curriculum.

In contrast, family medicine organizations have recently made significant efforts to engage medical students through offering mentorship opportunities and creating more exposure to the field. While these efforts haven't yet solved the family physician shortage, they have laid important groundwork, and the recent pay restructuring may further encourage student interest over time.

Oncology, however, hasn't seen the same level of focus. Medical students often receive limited exposure to oncology during placements, and learning opportunities can be

scarce due to the perceived complexity of the specialty. Without more structured opportunities such as clinical rotations, mentorship programs and educational events, students may feel unsure about what a career in oncology entails. This lack of exposure can lead to fewer students pursuing oncology, leaving newly created training positions unfilled.

## **Barriers to pursuing oncology**

In addition to limited exposure, there are other factors that may discourage medical students from considering oncology.

- **Compensation and recruitment challenges:** Oncologist compensation in Alberta hasn't been renegotiated in nearly a decade, making it less competitive compared to other provinces. While financial incentives aren't the only factor in specialty choice, they are important, especially for students managing high tuition costs and debt.
- **Burnout and workload concerns:** Oncologist burnout is becoming an increasingly recognized issue. With higher patient volumes and longer wait times, oncologists face greater emotional and mental strain, particularly when delayed treatments result in poorer outcomes. For medical students evaluating potential career paths, the risk of burnout and work-life balance considerations play a significant role.

## **Why this matters for medical students and the future of oncology**

As future physicians, the current state of oncology in Alberta directly affects us. If training seats remain unfilled and the oncology workforce is unable to meet demand, we may face greater challenges when referring patients, and those of us interested in oncology may encounter higher workloads and burnout early in our careers. Additionally, without proper exposure to oncology during medical school, students may miss the opportunity to discover a rewarding and impactful specialty.

## **Moving forward: The role of medical education in oncology recruitment**

To address these challenges, it's important to create more opportunities for medical students to

engage with oncology early in their training. This could include:

- Increasing oncology placements and clinical rotations during medical school.
- Developing mentorship programs that connect students with practicing oncologists.
- Hosting workshops and educational events that highlight the diverse roles and opportunities within oncology.
- Advocating for competitive compensation and support systems to address oncologist burnout, making the specialty more appealing to future physicians.

## **Final thoughts**

The growing demand for oncology services in Alberta highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to workforce planning. While increasing training seats and

recruiting oncologists from outside the province are important steps, engaging medical students is equally critical.

By fostering interest in oncology early in medical education, we can help ensure that Alberta's health care system is prepared to meet the future needs of cancer patients—and that those of us entering the field are supported in building sustainable, fulfilling careers.

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