National Neurological Strategy for Canada – The time is now

As Canada emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s time to tackle one of the most challenging but ultimately solvable health issues of the twenty-first century: the prevention, treatment and cure of neurological conditions.

It is time for unprecedented collaboration within the brain health community, building on existing national strategies and global initiatives. NHCC is ready to help lead this exciting collaborative approach.

NHCC Vision for Neurological Health

- Neurological health is valued, promoted and prioritized with representation in health policies, plans and budgets;
- Neurological disorders are prevented and treated, avoiding deaths and disability, and improving quality of life through access to health care services, essential medicines and ongoing research;
- Social, economic and educational needs and freedom from stigma and discrimination are prioritized and protected for individuals living with neurological conditions and their caregivers.

Synergistic Approach to Neurological Health

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of governments working together with citizens for a common goal. A National Neurological Strategy for Canada is an opportunity for collaboration beyond the scale of what we have ever experienced previously.

The Government of Canada has recognized that strategies are important to solving health problems, including the National Mental Health Strategy (launched 2012), the National Dementia Strategy (launched 2019), the National Autism Strategy (launched 2020). In addition, the Canadian Brain Research Strategy received funding in 2020 for development work.

Building on this important work and the findings in the seminal report Mapping Connections: An understanding of neurological conditions in Canada, NHCC proposes the creation of a National Neurological Strategy for Canada to allow all Canadians to maximize brain health.
# National Neurological Strategy for Canada

NHCC believes it is vital that a National Neurological Strategy for Canada be developed to tackle the knowledge gaps and needs of the millions of Canadians living with neurological disease, illness or injury.

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<tr>
<th>Strengthening Government of Canada leadership of neurological health</th>
<th>Investing in and improving accessibility to early diagnosis, comprehensive treatment and care</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Supporting human rights-based laws, policies and programs for people living with neurological conditions;</td>
<td>• Coordinating equitable access and delivery of health and social care services across the life course including transitioning from one stage of life to the next;</td>
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<td>• Ensuring budgets are proportionate with the human and other resources needed;</td>
<td>• Making essential medicines accessible and affordable equitably across the country, including drugs for rare disorders;</td>
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<td>• Reinforcing multi-sectoral linkages for coordinated action involving all stakeholders, including people living with neurological conditions and caregivers.</td>
<td>• Ensuring caregivers have supportive programs and financial assistance;</td>
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<td>• Supporting palliative care planning and programing.</td>
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<th>Investing in capacity building of neurological health care workforce</th>
<th>Reducing stigmatization and discrimination</th>
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<td>• Investing in training, support, retention and capacity-building of a non-specialist neurological health care workforce;</td>
<td>• Improving public attitudes and protecting the rights of people with neurological conditions by raising awareness and promoting a better understanding of neurological conditions;</td>
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<td>• Investing in digital education and online learning programs to accelerate workforce training to enhance equitable access to care.</td>
<td>• Empowering individuals from all cultures to identify their health needs, participate in the planning and delivery of services and play an active role in maintaining their own health and well-being;</td>
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<td>• Promoting neurological development and health across the life course.</td>
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<th>Strengthening health information systems</th>
<th>Fostering strategic approaches to research into neurological conditions</th>
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<td>• Building national capacity to collect, monitor and report on population and health care system data related to neurological conditions;</td>
<td>• Increasing the attention given to neurological conditions in national and global research agendas, including access to clinical trials for treatments for rare disorders;</td>
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<td>• Supporting development of electronic medical records with appropriate access for individuals living with neurological conditions.</td>
<td>• Encouraging the use of innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence and precision medicine to consolidate currently fragmented research approaches and identify new treatment options;</td>
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<td>• Supporting the Canadian Brain Research Strategy Network on a long-term basis.</td>
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(Adapted from a proposed global multi-sectoral approach by ONEneurology.)
Neurological health is a global concern

The United Nations and the World Health Organization have recognized that brain health – both neurological and mental health – is a pressing issue that all countries must address. Currently:

- Only 24 percent of countries worldwide have stand-alone neurological health policies. Canada is not among them, despite being a high-income country.
  - According to the WHO Atlas Country Resources for Neurological Disorders, 2017, most of the countries without stand-alone neurological health policies are low-or middle-income countries.
- Over the past 30 years, the number of deaths due to neurological disorders has increased by almost 40 percent worldwide.
  - Researchers attribute this increase to population growth, ageing populations and the lack of available treatments for neurological conditions.
- In 2018, the United Nations identified neurology as a priority area resulting in WHO creating a dedicated Brain Health Unit.
- At the 2020 World Health Assembly, countries around the world unanimously approved a resolution to develop a 10-year Intersectoral Global Action Plan on epilepsy and other neurological disorders. Canada spoke in favour of the resolution.

In brain research, Canadian scientists, represented by the Canadian Brain Research Strategy (CBRS), have joined researchers from nations around the world to form the International Brain Initiative. Its goal is to move neuroscience forward by increasing collaboration and knowledge sharing, leveraging talent and reducing duplication of efforts.

- A number of regions including the European Union, the United States, Japan and China are already funding large-scale brain research initiatives. As yet, Canada is not.
- NHCC is a key partner organization of CBRS ensuring that the voices of people with experience are represented in the creation of a Canadian research strategy.

Mapping Connections has pointed the way

Canada’s investment of $15 million in 2009 forged the way toward a better understanding of the impact of brain conditions through the National Population Health Study of Neurological Conditions, the most comprehensive examination of neurological illnesses, disorders and injuries ever undertaken in Canada. The subsequent study report, Mapping Connections, provided important new information but also emphasized there is still much work to be done.

Knowledge gaps that need addressing include:

1. Gaps in the knowledge of the impacts about how neurological conditions affect various communities and socio-economic groups differently:
   - a. Children affected by a neurological condition, and those living with an affected parent or sibling;
   - b. Women who disproportionately develop certain neurological conditions, or, if not affected personally, more often tend to take on the role of caregivers to those who are affected;
   - c. Individuals in Indigenous populations (First Nations, Inuit and Metis).

2. Gaps in knowledge of health services use and availability of services for:
   - a. Individuals who experience mental health issues as part of their neurological condition including the important issues of stigma and access to services;
   - b. Individuals who have cognitive decline resulting from a neurological disease or injury;
   - c. Caregivers of individuals with neurological conditions along the life course.

3. Gaps in knowledge about the risk factors for the development and progression of neurological conditions:
   - a. Individuals with less-prevalent neurological conditions (rare disorders) such as Huntington disease and Rett syndrome;
   - b. Extent of neurological conditions among children (cerebral palsy, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, brain injury and stroke), and the persistence of these conditions into adulthood.

4. Gaps in knowledge about the risk factors for the development and progression of neurological conditions:
   - a. Risk factors for the progression of neurological conditions;
b. Relative and population-attributable risk of modifiable risk factors for the onset of neurological conditions.

Moving forward on neurological health

It is time for unprecedented collaboration and to build on existing national strategies and global initiatives. NHCC is ready to help lead this exciting collaborative approach which would drive knowledge to action and result in the best quality of life for Canadians affected by neurological conditions. It is critical that governments work collaboratively with stakeholders by developing a National Neurological Strategy for Canada.

Neurological conditions can occur across the life course

There are hundreds of neurological conditions, some that affect hundreds of thousands of individuals in Canada, and some that affect just a few. All can be devastating to individuals’ quality of life and their families and caregivers. Many share similar risk factors and outcomes.

- **At birth** – Cerebral palsy, characterized by the loss or impairment of motor function, results from brain damage caused by injury or abnormal development while a child’s brain is still developing - before birth, during birth or immediately after birth. Cerebral palsy is the most common childhood disability\(^a\);
  - **Childhood** – Rett syndrome is a neurodevelopmental condition. It has a devastating impact: loss of spoken language, gross motor and fine motor skills and many other medical complications. There is currently no cure. While brain tumours can occur at any age, in children they are a leading cause of death\(^ix\);
  - **Adulthood** – Conditions such as Huntington disease and multiple sclerosis (MS) occur most frequently in midlife (from 30 to 55). In addition, dystonia, MS and other conditions such as depression and other mental illnesses are often episodic in nature, resulting in periods of disability that can vary in severity and duration, and persist for the rest of the lifespan\(^xii\);
  - **Older adults** – Neurodegenerative conditions like Parkinson’s disease and various types of dementia most typically occur in adults over 60, with the incidence rising with increasing age\(^xiii\). While stroke can happen at any time, it occurs more frequently in those over 65\(^xiv\). Stroke is the tenth leading cause of disability in Canada\(^xv\);
  - **Entire lifespan** – Epilepsy and traumatic brain injury (TBI) can occur across the entire lifespan from young children to older adults, all genders and all ethnicities. Epilepsy is the most common, chronic brain disease with seizures being an important symptom. It can be a consequence of other brain conditions. Traumatic brain injury ranges from concussion to severe impairment. TBI occurs frequently in males between 15 and 25 years of age, often as the result of bicycle, motorcycle or motor vehicle collisions or sports-related injuries, and in older adults because of falls\(^xvi\).

The complete list of knowledge gaps is available at NHCC Mapping Connections: Gaps Identified. The results of an NHCC-led assessment of progress made on knowledge gaps are available at Mapping Connections Assessment Report 2018.
References

1. 2016 Report of INMHA Evaluation Panel from the CIHR Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction
5. The Canadian Brain Research Strategy is a pan-Canadian endeavour which aims to link brain research initiatives and projects, public and private funders, and patient organizations in a uniquely collaborative effort that will push the frontiers of brain science. It coordinates Canada’s participation in the International Brain Initiative. Accessed at https://canadianbrain.ca/
6. From 2009-2013, NHCC, with the Government of Canada, helped lead the most comprehensive study of neurological conditions ever undertaken in Canada. The study resulted in Mapping Connections: An understanding of neurological conditions in Canada, which provided a vital base of information for all to use to help improve the lives of Canadians living with brain conditions, their families and caregivers.