

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Sounding Board: Virtual care, pharmacists contributing to reinvigorated Canadian wellness, productivity

To say the coronavirus pandemic has had an unimaginable impact on Canadian life is an immense understatement – it has literally reshaped the way we work, interact socially and access health care.

To that end, the pandemic has – and continues to – carve a path for a range of health-care innovations now supported by a large enough dataset to signal that a shift is on the horizon for how employees and employers experience health care in our country.

The way we triaged the impact of the coronavirus spurred advancements in health-care delivery, shifting from in-person visits to health-care providers in favour of phone calls and online video meetings. While not without its challenges, this shift to virtual care contributed directly to patient and health-care worker safety during the pandemic and appears to be supporting other lasting and positive outcomes, too.

Fifty-one per cent of Canadians have had to increase their use of virtual health care since the start of the pandemic, according to a May 2021 survey by Angus Reid for Calian Group Ltd. And a similar percentage (49 per cent) of respondents would like to continue using virtual care after the pandemic is over and safety precautions are lifted.

Unfortunately, while many Canadians adapted to virtual care, data from the 2021 Express Scripts Canada prescription drug trend report showed that 2020 saw a significant drop in new claimants for chronic diseases including diabetes, depression and cancer. From the end of March to December 2020, depression and cancer saw a two per cent decline in weekly new claimants while diabetes saw a one per cent decline. As a result, last year, more than 100,000 Canadians were suspected of living with undiagnosed and therefore untreated serious illnesses.

The past two years has also seen pharmacies transform from their traditional role to now being embraced as an expanded and further trusted source of primary care, one that has proved itself adept at supporting early intervention efforts and providing other forms of preventative medicine.

Beyond facilitating coronavirus tests and administering vaccines, pharmacists have elevated their duties to include offering basic health checks and consultations through in-person visits and video and phone support.

Employees aren't the only ones benefitting. Employers also see the value that virtual pharmacy teams provide, including access to comprehensive services offered in the convenience of the employee's home or other location of their choosing. It's a win-win. Employees achieve and sustain better health and employers realize reduced health-care costs and increased productivity. Little wonder that employers are increasingly



ADIL LADHA

**DIRECTOR OF PHARMACY
PROCUREMENT AND OPERATIONS,
EXPRESS SCRIPTS CANADA**



seeking drug benefits programs that include integrated employee access to pharmacy expertise.

We believe pharmacies will continue to play a transformational role in the Canadian health-care landscape with services that includes health risk assessment, health promotion, patient health coaching, disease and disability management and medication management. It's encouraging that some opportunities could be found during the pandemic. Among them, pharmacies have emerged as progressive contributors to Canada's health-care system and key partners in supporting a healthy economy, too.

By serving as patient advocates dedicated to providing personalized care and remaining steadfastly committed to innovation and continuous improvement, we are confident that pharmacists will continue to deliver enhanced services, convenience and better outcomes for all Canadians.

Adil Ladha is director of pharmacy procurement and operations at Express Scripts Canada and is responsible for the management and direction of Express Scripts Canada Pharmacy across Canada.

