

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau,
Prime Minister of Canada

The Honourable Navdeep Singh Bains,
Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland,
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance

The Honourable Anita Anand,
Minister of Public Services and Procurement

The Honourable Patty Hajdu,
Minister of Health

EVEN AS HOPE RISES, A NARROW FOCUS ON VACCINES IS A RISK CANADA CAN'T AFFORD

Dear Prime Minister and Ministers,

Over the past eight months, Canada has expended billions of dollars to battle the COVID-19 pandemic and to help individuals and businesses suffering economically. These expenditures include more than \$1.2 billion to secure access to a number of potential vaccines.

As of last Monday, with Pfizer's announcement that its COVID-19 vaccine prevented more than 90 per cent of symptomatic infections in a clinical trial, that investment seems set to pay off.

Although the news is encouraging, the new vaccine (frankly any new vaccine) still has hurdles to overcome. There are many unknowns — how long the immunity it provides may last; the degree of protection it provides to the most immune compromised and vulnerable; and its long-term safety. There are also formidable supply and distribution issues. Storage requirements alone will severely complicate distribution of this specific vaccine, especially in lower income countries. (The vaccine must be stored at about minus 75C, about 50 degrees colder than any other vaccine currently in use and colder by far than the current freezers in labs, doctors' offices and pharmacies go.) So, while there is hope on the horizon, that horizon may be further away than it seems.

Meanwhile, other nearer-term remedies, such as drug therapies, are being neglected.

Our own research team, made up of some of North America's leading experts on respiratory inflammation and led by one of this nation's best research institutes, is struggling to attract the relatively low level of funding we need to proceed with the Health Canada approved Phase III clinical trial of a repurposed generic drug developed by Pulmonem, a Canadian biotech start-up, which could provide a quick, safe and cost-effective treatment for COVID-19.

Combatting this virus requires several complementary approaches, based on good science including randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trials. Vaccines, certainly, but also antivirals, plasma trials, corticosteroids, and drug therapies — both old and new — are all part of an effective strategy to address the viral pandemic. While Canada is investing in all of these approaches, the focus on vaccines is disproportionate.

We call on the Canadian Government to reassess its strategic COVID-19 research response and urgently expand funding to accelerate the development of therapeutics.

Infection rates, hospitalizations and mortality rates are rising in a second wave that shows no signs of receding. In less than a year, the worldwide death toll of COVID-19 is already over a million. Let's not lose years and lives by putting all our eggs into the vaccine basket.



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