

A simple solution for better health and better health care: Get more Canadians more active.

Author: Bob Elliott, Senior Leader, The Sport Matters Group

Do you want to see Canada's health care system get better? Canadian children get fitter and happier? Canadian adults avoid chronic diseases like cancer and heart failure?

And what if we could do all that while making major strides to help Canada's economy?

It's all possible.

By getting more Canadians more active.

And we can get there through smart investments in prevention and strong leadership from the next federal government.

These issues are getting precious little attention during the current federal election campaign which should be alarming to every voter. As the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* pointed out in a recent editorial, "Too often, at election time, we neglect our health care concerns and let economic fears dominate how we vote. This must change, immediately."

The answer lies in an approach that centres on prevention, with increased investments in sport and physical activity (among other things) that will save billions of dollars and, more importantly, thousands of lives.

Study after study, expert after expert, all tell us the same thing: despite the fact that governments spend more on health care than anything else, the system needs improvement. We have one of the better health care systems in the world but it has its flaws.

Those experts also tell us about the overwhelming evidence that links regular physical activity with improved health, weight loss, reduced stress, greater energy, and better sleep.

Primary health care rightfully takes up the lion's share of provincial/territorial and federal budgets. However, there's a strong case for governments to increase spending on preventative health care, including an emphasis on encouraging more Canadians to be more physically active.

This statistic may surprise you: in a 2013 study by the Canadian Institute of Actuaries, it shows that all governments in Canada spent, on average, 44% of their budgets on health care. The Institute estimates that by 2037 that number will be 69% -- fully two-thirds of all government spending! Where will we find the money to pay for other necessary programs?

There are numerous studies that point to the benefits of physical activity to one's health and to the economy.

Men who are more fit in middle age are less likely to be diagnosed with colorectal cancers according to a recent study out of the University of Vermont.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, increasing physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour (they are two different things) has the potential to reduce hypertension cases by 220,000 by the year 2040 while also reducing the number of new diabetes cases by 120,000 and heart disease cases by 170,000.

Getting moving and active is associated with as much as a 30% reduction in all causes of mortality rates according to *Applied Physiology, Nutrition and Metabolism, 2012*. The World Health Organization has determined that physical inactivity is the 4th leading risk factor for global mortality.

Not only does getting Canadians to be more active and less sedentary bring positive advantages to individuals it also has the potential to bring significant advantages to the economy.

According to a study done by the Conference Board of Canada in 2014, increasing physical activity and decreasing sedentary behaviour by 10% between 2015 and 2020 would have a dramatic impact on Canada's GDP and on the amount spent on health care. The number of absentee days could drop by over 90,000. A 2010 report estimated that direct costs of overweight and obesity represented \$6 billion or 4.1% of Canada's total health care budget

The federal government spends some \$9 billion (2013 numbers) on health care (excluding provincial/territorial transfers) and a mere 2% of that is spent on initiatives that encourage healthy, active living by Canadians. There's a disconnect in all of the above and it's time to rectify it. If the federal government were to show leadership and increase investment in programs that encourage healthy, active living initiatives -- and incentivize the provinces and territories to do the same -- we might be able to minimize the negative effects of inactivity and sedentary behaviour.

Now is our opportunity to seek a change to the way our elected leaders look at health care. At what point will those elected leaders make the necessary decisions to invest in the long term health of individual Canadians and our health care system as a whole? The federal government can and must take a leadership role and take investment in healthy, active living initiatives and health promotion programs to the next level.

The Children's Fitness Tax Credit, introduced in 2006 by the Conservative government, is one positive step. The move last year to double it to \$1,000 while making it refundable is a step in the right direction but, frankly, we need to do more. The Liberals and NDP have promised to keep the tax credit for children should they get elected. Should the Conservatives get re-elected, they have promised to study the possibility of an adult fitness tax credit however the other parties to date have not committed to such a measure.

The Green Party have promised to make an investment of \$500 million over 5 years to "aggressively address inactivity and obesity". They will also re-introduce a school-based fitness testing program among other initiatives.

Every Canadian voter should be asking local candidates what they plan to do about this dilemma. Will they work towards increasing federal spending on preventative measures such as healthy, active living and physical activity or will they let future generations worry about it?

Bob Elliott, Senior Leader
The Sport Matters Group
www.sportmatters.ca

The Sport Matters Group is a voluntary network of people and organizations who believe that values-based, ethical and accessible sport, physical activity and recreation are integral to Canadian culture and the development of our people, communities and nation.