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EDITORIAL: Fighting for Canadian Kidney Patients

Every day, Canadians living with kidney failure from coast-to-coast struggle with the financial burden of dialysis treatment. Not only do out-of-pocket costs place a strain on families, financial stress also takes a toll on their physical and mental health. Despite Canada's universal health care system, many people on dialysis struggle to make ends meet. A remarkable 20% sometimes go without food, medications and other basic necessities as a result of the financial burden of treatment.

Kidney disease changes peoples' lives forever. Dialysis is a life-sustaining treatment option and transplant is not a cure. I have met patients across the country who have shared details of their treatment journey with me. Their dialysis treatment regimes, which require at minimum several hours three times a week, can take a tremendous toll on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Their ability to work full-time can be compromised and their family routines severely affected. We have heard heartbreaking stories about how some patients have been plunged into serious financial distress because of their reduced income and high out-of-pocket costs associated with their treatments.



Bringing the kidney community together to advocate for improvements to care options and supports is vital to the health and well-being of all those affected now, and those who may face kidney failure in the future. I am committed to making every patient voice count. Everyone deserves to have access to healthcare and to wellness, socio-emotional, and financial assistance that supports his or her care choices.

One in 10 Canadians has kidney disease, and millions more are at risk. Each hemodialysis treatment normally takes four to five hours, three times per week, so transportation to and from dialysis can be a significant, and costly, challenge. People living with kidney failure frequently face substantial financial challenges related to loss of income, coupled with increased transportation and medication costs.

The results of a recent survey to quantify the financial burden of treatment administered by The Kidney Foundation of Canada and the Canadian Association of Nephrology Social Workers (CANSW) were staggering. The effects of this burden are clear.

The report shows that the out-of-pocket costs of dialysis treatment are a significant burden to Canadians with kidney failure. The reported annual average out-of-pocket costs related to dialysis treatment ranged from \$1,400 to \$2,500. This is substantial when you consider that 55% of respondents reported an annual household income of less than \$35,000 and 23% reported an annual household income of less than \$20,000. The out-of-pocket costs represent a considerable percentage of total household income.

As a charitable organization we have endeavoured to alleviate this burden. In 2017, The Kidney Foundation provided more than \$350,000 through our Short-Term Financial Assistance program; however, the money we provide is temporary solution to a much larger problem. This is a systemic problem which needs to be addressed by government at all levels. Changes are required to help improve the lives of those living with kidney disease.

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is making the following recommendations to federal and provincial governments to address the financial burden of kidney failure.

1. Subsidize transportation costs and expand access to travel grants, particularly for people in rural areas.
2. Minimize disparities in accessing medications for people with kidney disease and develop mechanisms to offset costs equitably across jurisdictions.
3. Provide adequate support for home dialysis through reimbursing utility costs and considering the financial and health literacy of patients when operationalizing “home-first” policies.

Despite boasting a universal health care system in Canada, there are serious gaps and inconsistencies in coverage across provinces that seriously affect those living with kidney failure. At a time when their kidneys are failing them, our health care system is also failing them. Changes are desperately needed so that a diagnosis of kidney failure doesn't also mean having to bear a financial burden. Our efforts will have been successful when those impacted by kidney disease are no longer burdened by financial hardship or experience gaps in services. I want all kidney patients to feel they have received adequate care and support from diagnosis to decision-making about treatment options and beyond.

Join The Kidney Foundation's call for action. Take the first important step by reading the Financial Burden of Kidney Disease Report and our recommendations for improved support of those impacted.

Elizabeth Myles
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