



DEC 30 2020

Our File: 20-1492

John Carpay, B.A., LL.B.
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Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms
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Dear John:

Thank you for your letter to the Honourable Jim Reiter, previous Minister of Health, regarding the measures taken in Saskatchewan's health-care system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I apologize for the delay in responding; a major focus for our government and the health system has been addressing matters related to the pandemic. I appreciate receiving your detailed questions and am pleased to respond where information is available.

The Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) suspended many health services including elective surgeries and diagnostic imaging tests in March 2020 in response to the pandemic. The decision was not made lightly knowing the resulting delays could have an impact on individuals and increase wait times for services. During the early days of the pandemic, emergency and most urgent diagnostic imaging and surgical services were maintained.

In a typical year, almost 90,000 surgeries are performed in Saskatchewan. While emergent and urgent surgeries were performed during the pandemic it is estimated that approximately 15,500 non-emergency surgeries were delayed between March 22 until the end of July due to COVID service reductions.

Between March 1 and June 30, 2020, approximately 4,600 fewer MRI exams, and 8,400 fewer CT exams were performed than in the same period in 2019.

Approximately 1,100 and 1,528 patients had their scheduled MRI and CT appointments deferred due to COVID-19 respectively. This includes both SHA and patient initiated referrals due to reduced capacity, and concerns about the spread of COVID-19.

Service resumption began in mid-May; however, levels of service across the province may vary at different times based on factors such as local COVID-19 outbreaks, capacity, and availability of care providers.

Province-wide, diagnostic imaging services are available at or exceeding 100 per cent of pre-COVID levels. During the months of July, August and September, the number of surgeries performed on a weekly basis has ranged from 85 to 116 per cent compared to the same weeks last year.

I am advised that the vast majority of scheduled surgeries and procedures that were cancelled in the early days of the pandemic have been re-scheduled. It is the practice of the SHA to prioritize the re-scheduling of cancelled procedures, whether the cancellation is related to COVID-19 or other reasons.

As you will know, the pandemic has our province and the world in an unprecedented circumstance. As a result, temporary pandemic virtual care codes were developed to compensate physicians for medically required services that ensure patients can continue to access their doctor safely. The codes are not intended to completely replace in-person services once the province moves forward with opening up access to more services.

As a private business, it is up to each physician office to carefully consider any COVID-19 return-to-work requirements and recommendations provided by their professional association and regulatory body, and to determine how and when they can return to providing in-person elective services or procedures.

COVID-19 remains a significant public health risk. Public health officials continue to assess the national and provincial risks based on the best available evidence. We will continue to re-evaluate and tailor our measures as necessary to ensure the safety of Saskatchewan people.

As the COVID-19 situation evolves, we are providing frequent updates to the public through our website at www.saskatchewan.ca/COVID19, and through news releases, and news conferences. The website provides information for Saskatchewan residents, health-care workers, schools, and workplaces, as well as guidance on infection prevention, self-isolation, self-monitoring, mass gatherings and travel.

Sincerely,



Paul Merriman
Minister of Health