ONTARIO'S ANESTHESIOLOGISTS:
A SECTION OF THE ONTARIO MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

POSITION STATEMENT:
ANESTHESIA HUMAN RESOURCES

Challenges and Solutions

Anesthesiologists provide essential surgical, obstetrical, diagnostic, pain and critical care in all hospitals across Ontario. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased surgical backlogs and intensified demand for anesthesia services. This has accelerated health human resource challenges for Ontario's anesthesia workforce. This is a call to action for governments, hospitals, patients, and physician organizations to work together for a future of anesthesia services that is stable, coordinated, and capable of the ongoing transformation needed to serve patients.

Ontario's Anesthesiologists represents nearly 1500 practising anesthesiologists in our healthcare system who envision a robust future of anesthesia services achieved through:

1. **Data-driven workforce planning** to inform and structure equitable, stable access to anesthesia services aligned with patient needs throughout Ontario.
2. **Greater investment in anesthesia care teams (ACT)** to meet the needs of patients wherever anesthesia services are provided, including ensuring adequate numbers of anesthesiologists and anesthesia assistants.
3. **Anesthesia care by physicians** including both specialist anesthesiologists and family practice anesthetists, who are fully supported and working to their full potential. ACT models should continue to be based on delegation, not substitution, of physician roles.

Purpose and Background

Anesthesiologists are central to high-quality and safe anesthesia patient care. Nearly every surgical, invasive diagnostic or therapeutic procedure requires some form of anesthesia, peri-operative care, and potentially, airway management. Throughout Ontario, anesthesiologists and anesthesia assistants enable safe care of patients of all ages and at all stages of life, illness and the care continuum. Our role is more crucial than ever given Ontario's complex, capacity- and time-challenged surgical, procedural and critical care programs and our vital function during pandemics. Anesthesiologists are the scientific and clinical anesthesia experts and are thus crucial participants in any changes to anesthesia services in the health-care system.

Solutions
Data-driven workforce planning

A data-driven model of anesthesia services is currently absent and necessary to inform a patient- and population-centred anesthesia workforce plan. Evidence-based health workforce planning promotes centralized planning, appropriate resource distribution, and local and system-wide innovation; helps mitigate shortages of anesthesia human resources and balance recurrent cycles of supply/demand mismatch; and seeks to understand the health system and anesthesia workforce in relation to population needs (I.L. Bourgeault, 2021). Robust planning is required now to ensure that patients continue to have access to safe anesthesia services provided by physicians.

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Greater investment in anesthesia care teams

The Ontario Anesthesia Care Team (ACT) model of care, implemented in 2009, is a successful and proven innovation that improves care through stable and optimal access to anesthesia services (S. Brown et al, 2009). In the ACT model, certified clinical anesthesia assistants work under the direction, delegation and supervision of a specialist physician anesthesiologist or family practice anesthetist. The ACT model must be expanded to further enhance patient care and case volume. This will require sufficient, ongoing investment with coordinated province-wide implementation that allows for adaptation in unique local/regional environments. Spread and scale of the model will benefit greatly from the ongoing national leadership, direction, and support of the Canadian Anesthesiologists' Society (CAS) and the Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists (CSRT).

Anesthesia care by physicians

Anesthesia care is safe thanks to a history of physician-led research and development, rigorous training (for physicians and anesthesia assistants), technology innovation and a culture of quality, systematic design, patient safety, and risk management. Existing anesthesia care teams with physicians and certified clinical anesthesia assistants should be fully supported and maximally utilized. Physician anesthesia providers efficiently and cost-effectively provide a broad set of services in rural, remote and urban settings. Introducing a new or non-physician anesthesia provider category as a solution to anesthesia shortages would disrupt existing team-based anesthesia patient care and divert crucial investment and expansion away from the ACT model. Investment in physician and anesthesia assistant training and the ACT anesthesia care team model is sensible and high yield in the short and long term.

Moving Forward

Anesthesia services in Ontario must evolve. Physicians and health workforce planning experts must play a central role in this evolution. Physician expertise in anesthesia care is critical for optimal patient-centred change and transformation of system design and care.

The leaders and members of Ontario's Anesthesiologists are committed to collaborating and coordinating with governments, hospitals, patients, and physician organizations to ensure a future of robust anesthesia services for patients in Ontario.

THIS POSITION STATEMENT WAS PRODUCED BY THE ANESTHESIA HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCES WORKING GROUP OF ONTARIO'S ANESTHESIOLOGISTS IN APRIL 2023, WITH THE ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE OF ONTARIO'S ANESTHESIOLOGISTS.

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