

[Click here to read on HillTimesResearch.ca \(Subscription required\)](#)

# Shortage of kids' over-the-counter meds in 2022 leads to cross-country proposal to fix children's health care

By **TESSIE SANCI** MAY 8, 2024

**Children's Healthcare Canada** is embarking on an ambitious plan to motivate federal, provincial, and territorial governments to work with children's health advocates towards an integrated and properly resourced health care system designed for Canada's youngest people.

The advocacy group on May 6 launched its report, *Beyond Band-aids: Delivering healthcare for kids*, containing 19 action items for the various actors that can help improve care for children. On the checklist for the federal government are three tasks: develop a national children's health strategy, hire a chief children's health officer, and create a funding envelope specifically for children's health and research.

Children's Healthcare Canada has been working on this plan since late 2022. The push to embark on this project followed heightened public awareness of the fragility of children's health when health care systems are overwhelmed and typical resources are scarce during virus season.

The end of 2022 saw daily headlines about a surge in respiratory syncytial virus affecting children, combined with a shortage of over-the-counter medication specifically for kids' colds and fevers. The federal Liberals found themselves importing acetaminophen and ibuprofen into Canada, and the House health committee in November 2022 questioned Health Canada bureaucrats about their efforts to ramp up supply.



Multiple factors led to Children's Healthcare Canada's new report on ways to improve health care delivery for children, said the group's CEO Emily Gruenwoldt. Those include the shortage of over-the-counter meds for children and a heavier virus season in late 2022, as well as the resulting media and political scrutiny of the situation.

Children's Healthcare Canada CEO **Emily Gruenwoldt** told Hill Times Research that those who provide care to young people "have known for some time" about the difficulties of providing care to kids.

What was different in fall 2022 and winter 2023 was the intense need for care combined with the media and political attention, as well as greater public awareness of the issue.

"At that point in time, we saw the moment to bring awareness to how undersized our health care systems were and how we have been underfunded for decades [prior to the issue] really hitting the radar," said Gruenwoldt during a phone interview on May 3. "So, this was a great opportunity for us to say this is what happens when we are underprepared and when we under-invest in children's health systems, and so it was a real call to attention."

Next steps included inviting federal and provincial politicians to visit local children's hospitals to see up close the stress of parents and children waiting for care, and health care professionals attempting to manage that demand. **Jean-Yves Duclos** (Québec, Que.), then the health minister, was one of those politicians. He visited Ottawa's **Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario** in March 2023.

**RELATED: AS HEALTH MINISTER SETS HIS SIGHT ON NICOTINE POUCHES, 2021 PROPOSAL TO REGULATE VAPING FLAVOURS REMAINS IN CANADA GAZETTE I**

The situation already had the federal government's attention. When the **Prime Minister's Office** [announced](#) in February 2023 a plan to provide \$25 billion in health systems funding to provinces and territories, it also announced a \$2-billion top-up to Canada Health Transfer funding to "address immediate pressures on the health care system, especially in pediatric hospitals and emergency rooms, and long wait times for surgeries."

Gruenwoldt called that top-up a historic announcement.

While Children's Healthcare Canada members were welcoming politicians into their institutions to witness the ongoing difficulties of providing care, they also began collaborating on the ideas that would lead to *Beyond Band-aids*.

Gruenwoldt said that of the three recommendations for the federal government, she would like the government to begin with "ring-fenced funding" for children's health services, including research.

The idea for targeted funding was inspired by the federal Liberals' work in negotiating Aging with Dignity agreements with provinces, according to the May 6 [press release](#) announcing the *Beyond Band-aids* report.

Aging with Dignity funding is meant to help provinces and territories improve their home care, community care, and long-term care services for seniors. All three territories and British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Saskatchewan have all signed agreements with the feds as of May 8.

Gruenwoldt told Hill Times Research that her organization is encouraged by the targeted funding, and she believes a similar approach would work to improve children's health. She also said that there is a lack of awareness of how poor children's health outcomes are in Canada, and that demographic-specific funding would make improving those outcomes more of a priority.

People are "shocked when we tell them that we actually ranked [30] out of 38 countries, according to OECD data, and [our rating is] falling," she said referring to a 2020 **UNICEF ranking** of countries based on children's well-being. "So, I think earmarking those funds makes it impossible to use them for other purposes, and really says to our audience, to the public, that this is really important to us and status quo is not an option."

Gruenwoldt called the remaining two recommendations—developing a national children's health strategy and hiring a chief children's health officer—"low-hanging fruit."

"Those are low-budget opportunities that put a stake in the table or stake in the ground to say, children are a priority for this country ... I think that would convene a number of stakeholders around the country to say and to kind of flush out, what is our vision?" she said, adding that it would force interested parties to question whether they are satisfied that Canada ranks 30 of 38 countries for children's health.

The move to hire a children's health officer in Ottawa would also prevent a national strategy from lying dormant, and connect different parties that could work together and learn from each other about the best ways to improve these systems, according to Gruenwoldt.

## Getting the word out

Gruenwoldt told Hill Times Research that the release of the report coincided with a reception in Ottawa on May 6 which was hosted by members of the inter-parliamentary children's health caucus. In attendance that evening was **Adam van Koeverden** (Milton, Ont.), parliamentary secretary to the sport and environment ministers, who is co-chair of the caucus.

A lobby day followed on May 7. Gruenwoldt said that leaders from children's hospitals across the country were in town to discuss the federal government's role in improving children's health outcomes.

**RELATED: [MP LATTANZIO'S 'REWORKED' MARKETING FOOD TO KIDS BILL DESIGNED TO PREVENT IMPASSE THAT BLOCKED S-228](#)**

The organization also arranged to have some of its members provide a technical briefing—similar to those provided by the Government of Canada when new legislation is unveiled—to journalists to discuss the report's recommendations.

Long-term strategies include upcoming meetings with bureaucrats from **Health Canada** and the **Public Health Agency of Canada**.

"We believe they have a lot of influence and opportunity to help us not only to elevate the issues, but also to connect the dots between work they're already leading and how it can support some of the priorities that we've identified," Gruenwoldt said, citing the federal government's work on improving data collection and health human resources as examples of similar priorities.

And members of federal and provincial parliaments across the country can expect invitations from Children's Healthcare Canada members to visit local groups and institutions that specialize in delivering care to kids.

"We really want to make sure that they are walking the halls and really getting a sense for not only what is the care and what is the role of these organizations, but what's the opportunity ahead of us

if we were to make kids a priority and to build capacity in these centers to meet the need," she said.

In addition to providing recommendations for federal and provincial levels of government, *Beyond Band-aids* takes the uncommon step of also including multiple recommendations for organizations like Gruenwoldt's.

When asked what Children's Healthcare Canada learned from this work, Gruenwoldt said the "biggest lesson" was understanding that governments aren't the only players responsible for resolving the problems though they do bring funding to the table.

Health care delivery organizations have decisions they can make locally, she said, and Children's Healthcare Canada has a role to play in bringing together partner groups to discuss and agree on the major priorities that can then be presented to governments.

"We have a role to play in being consistent in our advocacy, [and] not confusing members of Parliament or the provinces with 36 different priorities. What are our top three? Or what are our top five?" Gruenwoldt said.