

## **Healthy Men Start as Healthy Boys Children's Healthcare Canada (CHC) Submission to Canada's National Men and Boys' Health Strategy Consultation**

### **Healthy Men Start as Healthy Boys**

The health of men begins with the health of boys, and the health of boys is shaped first and foremost by access to high-quality, equitable and integrated pediatric healthcare systems. Children are not small adults. They require systems, spaces, equipment, medications, and workforce models designed specifically for their needs and stages of development.

A National Men and Boys Health Strategy that does not explicitly address upstream investments and interventions to ensure timely assessment and diagnosis misses the opportunity for the greatest impact and return. The pediatric window is not a precursor to men's health; it is where men's health begins. Getting this right means investing in the health systems built to serve boys from their very first encounter with the healthcare system.

### **Stigma and Help-Seeking**

Canada's children's healthcare systems are where help-seeking patterns are established early. Gender norms regarding what it means to be a man begin shaping boys' relationships with healthcare long before adulthood. 26% of men report feeling a sense of stigma engaging with health education, rising to 39% among young men aged 25 to 34. Good mental health begins in infancy, yet the data show a system that is losing young men over time. One in ten young men did not feel confident in their understanding of their own health, and between 2012 and 2022, the percentage of young men aged 15 to 24 reporting very good or excellent mental health fell from 70% to 52%. These are not new problems emerging in adult settings—they are patterns that well-resourced children's healthcare systems are designed to identify and address early.

The opportunity is clear. Research confirms that improving boys' earliest healthcare experiences is one of the most powerful levers available for improving men's health outcomes: 67% of men who felt satisfied in their first healthcare encounter say they are more likely to seek help in the future, compared with only 26% of those who felt unsatisfied. Equipping boys with positive healthcare experiences from the start is not just good pediatric practice, it is upstream men's health strategy.

### **Mental Health and Well-Being**

The scale of the challenge is already visible in pediatric data: 20% of all hospitalizations among children and youth in Canada are related to mental health disorders. Canada has one of the highest adolescent suicide rates among wealthy nations, and four in ten parents worry they cannot access timely care for their sick children. Addressing these gaps is central to CHC's national advocacy for right-sized children's healthcare systems and a strategy that speaks to the unique needs of children and youth.

The economic case for investing upstream is strong. The World Health Organization finds that investments in mental health before age 12 deliver a 4:1 return in costs avoided. A 2025 Deloitte analysis commissioned by CHC and Canada's Children's Hospital Foundations found that every dollar invested in children's healthcare generates up to a nearly five-fold return. Recognizing

childhood as a foundational life stage is not only the right approach but also the most cost-effective one.

### **Life Stages and Transitions**

Health Canada's consultation acknowledges that the factors leading to poorer health outcomes for men and boys do not begin in adulthood. However, the earlier pediatric years, where health trajectories are first shaped, are not reflected. Explicitly recognizing these years would ensure that the distinct health needs of children and youth receive the dedicated focus they require.

The international strategies Health Canada is drawing upon to inform its work, including England's Men's Health Strategy 2025 and the WHO European Region Strategy on Men's Health and Well-Being, adopt lifecycle approaches that recognize men and boys' health needs across all stages of life. A focused strategy on the unique needs of children and youth, when paired with a men's health strategy, enables a life course approach to health in Canada.

The transition from pediatric to adult care represents a critical moment where gaps in support lead to preventable negative health outcomes. CHC's national Transition to Adult Care Hub brings together clinicians, researchers, youth and families with a shared vision of bridging the gap between current treatment practices and evidence-based solutions. Research initiated by the Hub confirms that while national transition guidelines exist, there is wide variation in how young people are supported, and that a national strategy backed by local leadership is essential for healthcare transition in Canada. Young men are disproportionately at risk at this transition, among the least likely to self-advocate or have established relationships with adult providers. Most adverse outcomes at this transition are preventable.

### **Recommendations**

- **Develop a dedicated child and youth health strategy designed to complement a men's health strategy.** The strategy would be strengthened by explicitly recognizing childhood as a foundational life stage. Children and youth are not small adults and boys are not small men. Their unique and specialized healthcare needs require a strategy of their own, one that works alongside this men's health strategy.
- **Name the pediatric-to-adult transition as a national priority intervention point.** The strategy should include an explicit commitment to invest in transition supports and to engage Canada's pediatric health systems, including children's hospitals and community pediatric programs, as essential implementation partners.
- **Bolster child and youth mental health to build a foundation for lifelong wellbeing.** Canada's pediatric mental health systems are the first line of response to mental health challenges in boys and young men and adequately resourcing them is essential to achieving the goals of this strategy.

**Children's Healthcare Canada** is a national association representing health service delivery organizations caring for children, youth and their families across the continuum of care in Canada. We welcome Canada's commitment to developing a strategy that supports the physical and mental health of men and boys and believe this would be strengthened by a child and youth focused strategy purposefully designed to complement national men's and women's strategies.

CHC welcomes the opportunity to engage with Health Canada.