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Canadians pessimistic wait times will be reduced

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OTTAWA - Canadians are not confident wait times for health-care services will improve over the next few years, a recently released government study says.

The Health Canada Wait Times Benchmark Study said the perceptions of hospital wait times is that they have either increased or remain unchanged over the last few years while two-thirds of Canadians are pessimistic about any reduction occurring in the next few years.

Conducted by Ipsos Reid for Health Canada, the poll attached to the study found Canadians generally feel there is a shared responsibility between the provincial and federal governments for reducing wait times.

The introduction said the report is intended to provide a "baseline understanding" of public opinion towards wait times.

And the document noted the gap between responsibility and action: "While most Canadians see both provincial and federal levels of government as responsible for reducing wait times, only a bare majority of Canadians think the federal government (52 per cent) and their provincial governments (55 per cent) have taken action to reduce wait times."

Overall, the poll found 65 per cent of Canadians are not confident wait times will get shorter, with the most pessimistic being found in Quebec, with 30 per cent responding they are "not at all confident" compared to only 16 per cent in Ontario and Alberta.

However, it revealed Canadians aged 55 or older are more confident wait times will get shorter than those between the ages of 35 and 54.

In terms of perception of responsibility for wait times federal versus provincial the report said respondents in Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta were more likely to say their provincial governments are "very responsible" while residents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba were more prone to say it is the federal government.

The telephone survey, conducted between Nov. 22 and Nov. 24 right before the last federal election call involved 1,000 telephone adult respondents and carried a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. Tracking data provided by Health Canada showed a drop of eight percentage points since May 2005 in the number of Canadians who rated the federal government's performance in the area of health care positively.

Only one-third of Canadians viewed the federal performance as positive, down from 41 per cent a year ago.

Asked further about the federal government's performance at the time the Liberals held office a plurality of Canadians, at 49 per cent, felt it had "done something but could do more" to reduce wait times while a similar portion, at 46 per cent, responded it has "done little" or "done nothing." Only three per cent believed the feds had done a "great deal."

Meanwhile, respondents were slightly more positive about their provincial governments' action, with 52 per cent saying they had done something while 43 per cent said they had done little or nothing.

The recent Conservative government budget reaffirmed the Conservative government's election

pledge for a patient wait-times guarantee one of its five priorities but provided no extra funds on grounds the provinces are already swimming in health-care money.

The budget included a government commitment to fulfil the 10-year, \$41-billion health-care accord reached in 2004 among the provinces and the defeated Liberal government. That includes a \$5.5 billion wait-times reduction fund.

The poll found a slight majority felt that being aware of the federal and provincial government agreement to reduce wait times had a positive impact on how they feel about the future of the health-care system. Just one in 10 said it had a negative impact on their view while one-third said it had no impact on them.

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