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Albertans wait the longest Patients face 10-month delay to see specialist

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Alberta is jeopardizing the health of its citizens with the country's longest waiting times for appointments with digestive disease specialists, says the incoming president of the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology.

"We're putting patients' lives at risk here," said Dr. Bill Paterson, president-elect of the association, which holds its annual meeting in Banff this weekend.

A Canadian Association of Gastroenterology study released Friday found most Alberta patients referred to see gastroenterologists had to wait more than 10 months for an appointment or procedure -- four months longer than recommended.

The association said those results, taken from a survey of its members, are the worst of any province and leave people waiting during a time that can be critical to treating diseases such as colon cancer.

The survey comes two days after Alberta said it wants to become a leading centre of cancer expertise and treatment, unveiling plans to cut rates of the disease by 35 per cent in two decades.

In its throne speech this week, the Klein government also promised to reduce the number of cancer deaths by 50 per cent by 2025 through spending on prevention, screening and research.

But the government has come under fire for not funding as many cancer drugs as other provinces and having weaker anti-tobacco legislation than some jurisdictions.

Now the CAG survey is raising questions about the province's waiting times for procedures such as colonoscopies, which can be critical to detecting colon cancer -- the second-leading cause of cancer death in the country.

"It's unacceptable that patients should be forced to wait," said Barry Stein, president of the Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada.

Health Minister Iris Evans conceded that Alberta does have more work to do before it will reach its cancer targets, but she argued the province has world-class cancer researchers and physicians.

"We're not where we have to be yet, I'll acknowledge that," Evans said.

The CAG study, which measured how long patients must wait before being seen or tested by a gastroenterologist, said New Brunswick and Ontario patients waited less time than Alberta's 40-week wait.

Most patients in those provinces wait 32 weeks, while three-quarters of B.C. patients wait 28 weeks.

The CAG also measured waiting times for patients with "alarm symptoms," which

could signal diseases such as cancer.

Ontario received the worst ranking in that category, with waits of 22 weeks for most patients.

Alberta, B.C. and Quebec all had an average wait of 16 weeks for the majority of patients in that category.

Despite its challenges, Paterson praised Alberta for moving toward a provincewide cancer screening program. Although no such program has been implemented yet, he said Alberta's plans are well ahead of other provinces.

The Calgary Health Region is also working with the University of Calgary to develop a colon cancer screening centre, set to open next year. Officials hope the centre will perform 10,000 colonoscopies a year.

"Alberta isn't there yet, but there are clear signs they are moving in the right direction," Paterson said.

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