

A Heavy Toll: Canadian Thoracic Society Report Reveals True Cost of Lung Disease

Many Canadians unaware of heavy price of COPD on patients and the healthcare system

February 2, 2010 – Ottawa, ON – A review of Canadian data by the nation’s leading lung specialists has provided the factual evidence to support what respirologists across the country have been suspecting for some time. Shockingly, more people are being admitted to Canadian hospitals each year with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) than any other major chronic illness (including heart attacks) and that number has been increasing dramatically in recent years.ⁱ

A new report released today by the Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS), entitled *The Human and Economic Burden of COPD: A Leading Cause of Hospital Admission in Canada*, is timely given the annual spike in hospitalizations due to lung infections each winter.

“Anecdotally, we’ve known for some time that we’re seeing a lot of COPD patients being admitted to our hospitals,” says Dr. Darcy Marciniuk, Chair, *Canadian Thoracic Society* COPD Committee and Respirologist at the University of Saskatchewan. “Perhaps what’s most concerning, is that the report shows patients frequently being admitted more than once. In fact, 18 per cent were admitted twice, and a further 14 per cent were admitted at least three times within the same year.”ⁱⁱ

A serious threat

COPD affects both men and women, is growing in prevalence - the only leading cause of death to do so - and is now the fourth leading cause of death in Canada.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a progressive lung disease that, over time, makes it hard to breathe. A person with COPD can experience a flare-up or exacerbation of their symptoms caused by everyday things as simple as catching a cold or flu, or going outside on a very cold day.

“What many people don’t realize is that COPD flare-ups can be very serious – leading to hospitalization and even death. I refer to flare-ups as ‘lung attacks’ because like the effect a heart attack has on the heart, a COPD lung attack causes significant and lasting damage to the lungs,” says Dr. Jean Bourbeau, Respirologist and Director of Respiratory Epidemiology and Clinical Research Unit at the Montreal Chest Institute, Quebec.

Weighing the human and financial burden

Once someone is admitted to the hospital for a COPD lung attack, they spend an average of 10 days there, with an average cost of \$10,000 per stay.^{iv} In fact, COPD lung attacks are the most costly of all reasons for hospitalization, and COPD as a whole could cost the Canadian healthcare system as much as \$1.5 billion per year, according to recent estimates.^v

But the human toll of the disease far exceeds any financial cost, as Judith Farley knows all too well. “COPD is clearly a debilitating disease. Having to rely on several medications plus oxygen 24 hours per day does limit one’s physical abilities. The psychological impact is very difficult to manage as well. It can be quite frightening when one is not able to breathe on the way to hospital by ambulance with a COPD lung attack. I’ve required hospitalization in the past and probably will again in the future.”

Prevention is the best medicine

The real tragedy is that COPD is preventable and treatable, but many people remain undiagnosed. While being checked and diagnosed early is the best way to slow progression of the disease, it is treatable at any stage.

“People can lead long, active lives with COPD if it’s detected and treated,” says Dr. Ronald Grossman, Respirologist and Chief of Medicine at Credit Valley Hospital, Mississauga, Ontario. “Patients can play a large role in taking control of their health by ensuring that they take medications as prescribed, follow their doctor’s advice about vaccinations for flu and pneumonia, quit smoking, and engage in regular physical activity.”

Anyone who currently smokes or has smoked in the past should ask their doctor about spirometry. It’s a simple test to check your lung health and is the only way to truly determine if someone has COPD.

To access a copy of *The Human and Economic Burden of COPD: A Leading Cause of Hospital Admission in Canada*, or for more information about COPD and how to manage your lung health, please visit the Canadian Lung Association website at www.lung.ca.

About COPD

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) is a respiratory disorder largely caused by smoking, characterized by progressive, partially reversible airway obstruction and lung hyperinflation, systemic manifestations, and increasing frequency and severity of exacerbations.

About the Canadian Thoracic Society

The Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS), founded in 1958, is the medical society of The Canadian Lung Association. The CTS promotes lung health by supporting the respiratory community through leadership, collaboration, research, learning and advocacy and by promoting the best respiratory practices in Canada. It also advises The Canadian Lung Association on scientific matters.

About this Report

"This report was authored by Susannah Benady on behalf of the CTS. It, and the corresponding media campaign, were made possible by an educational grant from GlaxoSmithKline Inc.

Broll will be available Tuesday, February 2, 2010 at 10:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

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ⁱ COPD Facts and Figures from *Life and Breath, Respiratory Disease in Canada* 2007 PHAC Report (2007).

ⁱⁱ Deaths by selected grouped causes, sex and geography – Canada, Mortality, Summary List of Causes – 2003: Statistics Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ Canadian Institute for Health Information. Respiratory Disease in Canada. /<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/rdc-mrc01/pdf/rdc0901e.pdf>S. 2001. Canadian Lung Association (accessed 20 February 2007) Ref Type: Electronic Citation.

^{iv} Mittman, N. et al. (2008) The cost of moderate and severe COPD exacerbations to the Canadian healthcare system. *Respiratory Medicine* **102**, 413-421.