

One Country, One Standard of Care

Why pan-Canadian health data and risk-based screening are essential for equitable care.

A connected Canada requires harmonized healthcare. Too often, the type and level of healthcare that individuals living in Canada receive is based on where they live. This fragmented approach to prevention, treatment, and care happens both between and within provinces and territories, subjecting Canadians to what has been called 'the postal code lottery'. Without pan-Canadian standards and approaches to healthcare, our Canadian health system cannot deliver equitable care. With 1 in 8 women in Canada expected to develop breast cancer in their lifetime, the need for a coordinated health data ecosystem, as well as prevention and care pathways is crucial.

At present, there is no standardized, national approach to how race, ethnicity, and Indigenous identity (REI) health data is collected, used, and managed. This means that Canada's health data ecosystem has not been developed using a pan-Canadian approach that enables Canadian health data to guide healthcare decisions and policies. Too much of the evidence guiding healthcare policies and practices in Canada comes from non-Canadian populations and data. While international evidence is valuable, it does not always reflect the diversity, geography, health system structure, or lived experiences of people in Canada. Only Canadian data can do that. In absence of this information, it is difficult to fully understand who is being left behind, where gaps in care exist, or how risk and outcomes vary across populations. This is especially pertinent for underserved and Indigenous populations. Subsequently, policymakers cannot track trends, design targeted interventions, or allocate resources effectively.

People across Canada who have been diagnosed with, or are living with, breast cancer want Canadian health data to guide Canadian healthcare decisions. They also want this guidance to be standardized nationally. It is important that Canada creates a robust health data ecosystem that enables health policies, decisions, and care that can be based on Canada's population. It is equally important that provinces and territories work together in its development, so that the standards and subsequent implementation are followed uniformly across Canada.

Canada's lack of national coordination is also evident in its approach to breast cancer screening for individuals that are at increased or high risk of developing breast cancer. Current national screening guidelines are designed for people at average risk of developing breast cancer. This fails to address the fact that breast cancer risk exists along a spectrum, influenced by both modifiable and non-modifiable factors. As a result, those whose risk levels are higher than average (such as those with dense breasts or hereditary risk) are left without guidance that is consistent across the country.

As it stands, the guidelines and access to breast cancer screening in Canada that do take into account an individual's risk level varies significantly between provinces and territories. For those at increased or high risk of developing breast cancer, this makes appropriate screening methods and frequency unclear, as well as access to early detection practices inequitable. Inconsistent guidance and access means that some people receive enhanced screening while others do not, not because of need, but because of where they live or how their risk is assessed. Such inequities can contribute to delayed diagnoses and missed opportunities for prevention.

Canada must adopt a risk-stratified approach to breast cancer screening that matches screening methods and intervals to an individual's risk. These guidelines, based on risk pathways, must also be supported by Canadian research and adopted at a pan-Canadian level.

National, pan-Canadian standards for REI data collection and risk-based screening are essential to addressing care gaps, ensuring equity, improving early detection, and preventing breast cancer. Government support through investing in Canadian data, enabling coordinated research, and implementing consistent national approaches can ensure that no one in Canada is left behind.

It is time to strengthen Canada's healthcare system so that it reflects the diversity and needs of the people it serves.

By Bukun Adegbembo

Bio: Bukun Adegbembo, MSc is a strategic operations, marketing, communications, and patient advocacy professional with over 5 years of non-profit experience and over 3 years of executive leadership experience. She is the current Director of Operations with the Canadian Breast Cancer Network (CBCN), Canada's leading patient-directed breast cancer health charity that voices the views and concerns of breast cancer patients through the promotion of information sharing, education and advocacy activities.

Headshot: *Attached to email*