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| **Briefing Note** **Date:** April 2020 | |
| **Topic:** | Cancer Screening and Surgeries during the COVID-19 Pandemic |
| **Prepared for:** | Joint Ontario Indigenous Cancer Committee Members |
| **Prepared by:** | Indigenous Cancer Care Unit, Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) |

**Purpose:**

* To provide an overview of access to cancer screening and surgeries based on Ontario Health’s (Cancer Care Ontario) recently published COVID-19 *Pandemic Planning Clinical Guideline for Patients with Cancer (2020)*,attached as an Appendix*.*

**Background:**

* Concerns were identified by Indigenous communities that cancer screening follow-up and cancer surgeries were being delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
* Any delay in a cancer diagnosis is especially devastating for Indigenous patients, as cancers are typically found in late stages of disease progression at the time of a diagnosis.
* Furthermore, Indigenous patients who live in northern and remote communities are disadvantaged due to increased barriers to accessing cancer screening, diagnostic testing and treatment (e.g. weather, geography, mode and lack of transportation, costs, and lack of respite care).
* These concerns originated in a statement made during a daily media press conference on March 26, 2020 regarding the delay to cancer surgeries.
* On March 27, 2020, Minister Christine Elliot responded to a reporter’s inquiry during a media press conference at Queen’s Park regarding the cancer surgery delay discussion on March 26, 2020. Minister Elliot responded to the inquiry by saying, “cancer surgeries will continue if a person’s life is in danger and this will be determined by the physicians and Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario), who have a Pandemic Plan in place, and each case will be assessed based on the patient’s personal health situation.”
* The Pandemic Plan is known as the COVID-19 *Pandemic Planning Clinical Guideline for Patients with Cancer (2020),* which provides recommendations for a systematic approach in determining priority for consultation and treatment of patients with cancer in Ontario during the time of a pandemic. This Guideline was informed by Cancer Care Ontario’s *Pandemic Clinical Guideline for Patients with Cancer (2009)*.
* The Pandemic Plan contains a framework to guide hospitals and clinicians in making appropriate decisions given regional/facility resources and capacity.

**Overview of Pandemic Plan related to Cancer Patients:**

*The Need for a Cancer Patient Priority Classification*

* A “cancer patient priority classification” has been developed to assist cancer programs in the management of patients referred with a cancer diagnosis; this is required to maintain a consistent approach for all facilities across the province. It is likely that there will be a dynamic situation that will vary from day-to-day.
* In the situation where there is a serious shortage of staff at the hospital, ambulatory clinics and many services will be cancelled. There will be a focus on potentially life-threatening and urgent care in the inpatient setting where staff can be re-deployed. Ambulatory cancer patients should be included in the focus on life-threatening and urgent care, with the recognition that some patients will need to be treated and the cancer centre may need to be considered for staff re-deployment.
* Resources may affect the capacity for centres to treat nearly as many patients as usual. Determining which patients will be treated may be necessary. An ethical framework for decision-making is required and follows next.

*Cancer Screening Guidelines*

* It is recommended that all routine screening appointments for breast, cervical and colon be deferred for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.
  + For patients who have received a fecal immunochemical test (FIT) kit in the mail, it is recommended that they wait to complete the test until after the COVID-19 pandemic. When a patient is ready to do the test after the pandemic, we encourage them to check the expiry date on the FIT device label first. If the device is expiring within two weeks or has already expired, it should be discarded. After the COVID-19 pandemic, patients can visit their doctor or nurse practitioner to order a new kit. Patients that live on a First Nation reserve can contact their health centre or nursing station to order a new kit.

*Cancer Screening Follow-Up Guidelines*

* Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) recommends follow-up of abnormal FITs continues, and for cervical and breast, the timing of follow-up may be dependent on the screening result (and the corresponding suspicion of cancer). Please see the below details which were shared with the Regional Cancer Programs by Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario):
  + Patients already screened, with abnormal screening results (but not highly suspicious for cancer):
    - Patients who have an abnormal screening result that is not highly suspicious for cancer on mammography, lung CT or cervical Pap screening may have their follow up appointment delayed.
  + Patients already screened, with abnormal screening result that is highly suspicious for cancer:
    - Patients who have an abnormal screening result with highly suspicious findings should be seen for assessment and other follow up.  As well, patients with an abnormal FIT should continue to be prioritized for diagnostic colonoscopy.
* Please note that these guidelines may be implemented differently across the regions. The Regional Cancer Programs would like to continue to provide cancer screening follow up with minimal delays and will do so based on regional capacity and clinical decision.

*Surgical Oncology Guidelines*

* Wait lists within each hospital will require regular review to determine priorities in light of bed and resource availability.
* In critical bed and resource situations, the surgical priority may need to be on life-saving procedures for those patients whose long-term prognosis for survival from cancer is good.
* Hospitals may plan to discontinue most outpatient surgery as it is not urgent.

**Proposed Next Steps:**

* The Indigenous Cancer Care Unit to discuss the Pandemic Plan with Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) to ensure guidelines meet the needs of all Indigenous cancer patients in Ontario.

**Appendix:**

1. *Pandemic Planning Clinical Guideline for Patients with Cancer (2020):*

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1. *COVID-19 Supplemental Clinical Guidance for Patients with Cancer (2020):*

