

Canada fares better than the U.S. on value for healthcare dollars — but lags behind other developed nations

by Jody Heymann and Douglas Barthold

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Here's a fact most Canadians probably don't know: Canadians live longer than people in the United States. Specifically, women in Canada live an average of 83 years, compared to 80 in the United States; men live

over 78 years on average compared to 75 in the United States. Why is this the case? There are clear links between mortality rates and the way countries invest in healthcare and improving social conditions.

This week we published a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* on the efficiency of healthcare systems at extending lives over the past two decades — and it's good news for Canadians. For every additional hundred dollars spent on healthcare in Canada, life expectancy was extended by nearly two months. The same expenditures were only associated with less than half a month of increased life expectancy in the United States.

The study assessed the gains in life expectancy from health spending in 27 countries, as well as across genders within each nation. After controlling for economic development, social expenditures, and behavior, we found significant differences in international levels of efficiency. Canada ranked eighth of 27 countries, while the US came in at 22nd.

We actually know quite a lot about what makes Canadian health policy so effective. Population health approaches to improving social conditions, as well as public health prevention and health promotion measures taken across the country, have helped to reduce both chronic disease and acute illness.

In other words, it's not only how much money is spent, but how the money is spent that matters. And it's not only spending on healthcare that makes a large difference to health outcomes. In our study, a country's social investments contributed to significant increases in longevity.

Findings from a global review of research conducted by the World Health Organization underscore the importance of social determinants of health, demonstrating how social conditions — from access to education and income, to improved early childhood care and good working conditions — have a powerful

effect on our health. Fortunately, federal, provincial and territorial policy makers across Canada have invested in much of what matters — from a social safety net to early childhood care, from parental leave to affordable university education.

So the Canadian portrait compares favourably to the American, but how does our healthcare investment compare to other developed nations in the study? Here, Canada falls short.

While Canada's life expectancy improvements have been far greater than that of the United States for the
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