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MIPP COVID-19 RESEARCH BRIEFING

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada:
Health Care Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic

- Pharmacare, one of the most prominent issues of the 2019 federal election, received considerably less media coverage during the pandemic. Long-term care in contrast received considerable coverage during the pandemic but received very little during the last federal election.

- The media shows sustained interest in mental health prior to and throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The focus on mental health issues increased by a small margin as governments started imposing lockdowns and social distancing rules.

- The media have given significant coverage to the Chief Medical Officers of Health (CMOH). Together with the premiers and prime minister, the CMOHs have become central figures in the communications plan and are key to communicating public health messages. To date, this seems to be a successful strategy. In comparison, there are fewer references to institutions such as the Public Health Agency of Canada. We have seen some criticisms of CMOHs but generally they are highly trusted. The concentration of authority in a single spokesperson does present a risk should people lose faith in the CMOH.

- The anti-vax movement has received little media coverage so far. This could change as a vaccine becomes ready for distribution.

Purpose of the Note

This briefing note examines how civil discourse of selected health care issues changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We compare media coverage 6 months prior to the crisis, which includes the time of the Canadian federal election, to 6 months after the onset of the coronavirus. This note also refers to Canadian polling data. Together, media coverage and polling data of selected issues give us an indication of the flavour of civil discourse before and during the pandemic. The note highlights areas of selected interest; it is by no means an exhaustive account.

This note represents one aspect of a larger research project we are undertaking. For more context on the emergence of COVID-19 and the response of the Government of Canada, please refer to Appendix 1. For more information about the framework we used, please see Appendix 2.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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Methods

We identified articles in which the following terms appeared in the title or body of the media article: pharmacare, long-term care[1], mental health, chief medical officer, public health agency, anti-vaccination[2], vaccination/vaccine. We chose these key terms to understand how the focus of the media was affected by the virus and what issues emerged as important as a result of COVID-19.

For the period of July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, we accumulated articles published in the front-sections of the *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, and by CBC News using the online database NexisUni and analyzed them using Excel. We excluded Business, Economy, Lifestyle, Culture, Entertainment, Art, Travel, and Weather. Due to the large number of published articles, we did not conduct content analysis of individual articles.

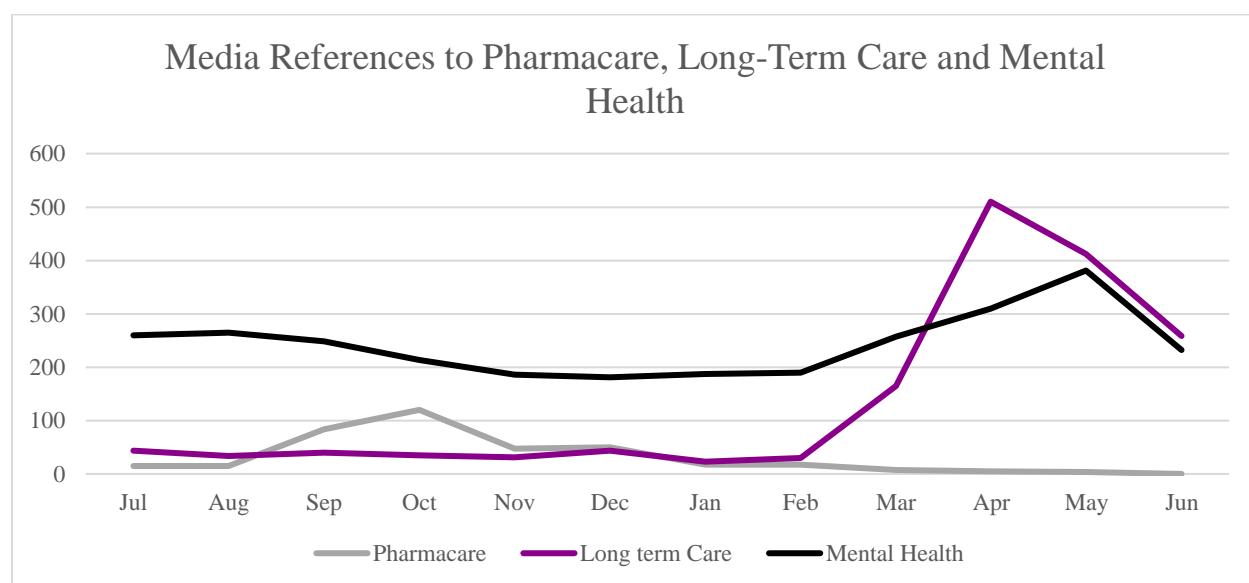## Election Policy Issues and Emerging Policy Issues

Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning the terms pharmacare, long-term care and mental health published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 1: Articles mentioning pharmacare, long-term care and mental health published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Term	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Mental health	694	825	1519	18.9
Pharmacare	331	50	381	-84.9
Long-term care	226	1399	1625	519

Mental health was the most commonly discussed key term in 2019 and continues to be a relevant issue in the media in 2020; the number of articles on mental health increased in 2020 but not by a large margin (Table 1). As government began imposing lockdowns and social distancing rules, the topics of anxiety, stress and mental health started emerging in the public sphere (Hiremath, Kowshik, Manjunath, & Shettar 2020); between April and August 2020, 55 to 65% of Canadians

indicated that their mental health was suffering as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020b). A small but steady increase in the number of articles mentioning mental health began in March 2020, peaking in May with a total of 381 articles published by the *Toronto Star*, *National Post* and CBC News (Figure 1).

Pharmacare was one of the most salient issues of the 2019 federal election, which explains the spike in pharmacare media-mentions in September and October (Figure 1) (Bricker, 2019). After the election, we see a drop in those mentions over time, reaching zero in June 2020. Despite being one of the main issues of the last Canadian election, and despite public support for the concept of universal pharmacare[3], articles discussing pharmacare largely disappear in the media (Figure 2).

Out of the three selected issues, long-term care, was the least mentioned key term in 2019 (Table 1). However, in March 2020, reports began highlighting the poor conditions and lack of oversight and quality control in long-term care facilities in the country after the first COVID-19 death in Canada occurred in a nursing home in British Columbia (Staples, 2020); 85% of Canadians with a senior relative living in a long-term care facility were concerned about his/her well-being as a result of the reported conditions in these facilities (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020a). A study released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information revealed that as of May 25, long-term care residents constituted over 80% of COVID-19 deaths in Canada, the highest among all countries studied (Szklarski, 2020). This caused a surge in media articles reporting on the issue.

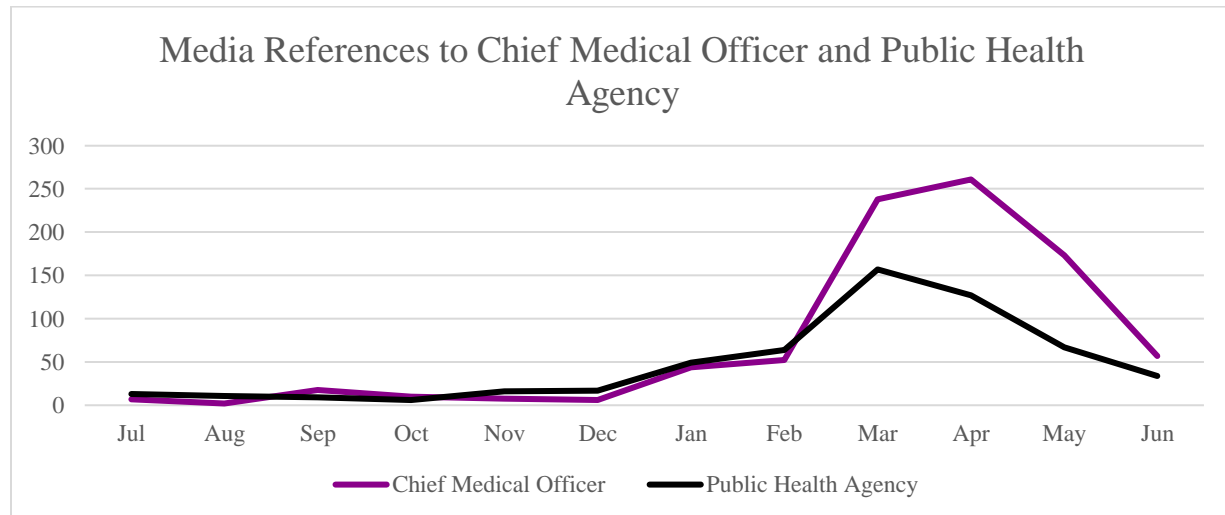## Trust in Institutions vs Individuals

Figure 2: Number of articles mentioning the terms chief medical officer and public health agency published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 2: Number of articles mentioning chief medical officer and public health agency published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Term	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Chief Medical Officer	42	757	799	1702.4
Public Health Agency	72	498	570	591.7

Both chief medical officer and public health agency had a surge in profile as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2 and Table 2). In January 2020, as COVID-19 begins to spread globally and when the Public Health Agency of Canada activates the Emergency Operation Centre to support Canada's response to the virus, media-mentions of chief medical officer and public health agency begin to increase at relatively the same rate (Figure 2). Although articles mentioning both terms continue to increase, articles mentioning chief medical officer overtake those mentioning Canada's public health agency. According to the latest Edelman Trust Barometer (2020), doctors, scientists and national health officials are the voices trusted by the public to deliver information about the crisis. Doctors generally, and chief medical officers for this case in particular, are highly trusted because they fulfill the three dimensions that people tend to look for to develop trust: honesty, expertise and concern (Peters, Covello & McCallum, 1997). Chief medical officers provide a human connection that is lost with the anonymity of the public health agency and are therefore helpful in communicating key public health messages. Some risk is associated with relying mainly on one figure to deliver an institution's message. Any criticism directed at the chief medical officer by the media (even if it is not directly associated with public health agencies) could cause confidence in public health agencies and their recommendations to decrease; moreover, a public fascination with the chief medical officer could distract from any message the government wants to convey.
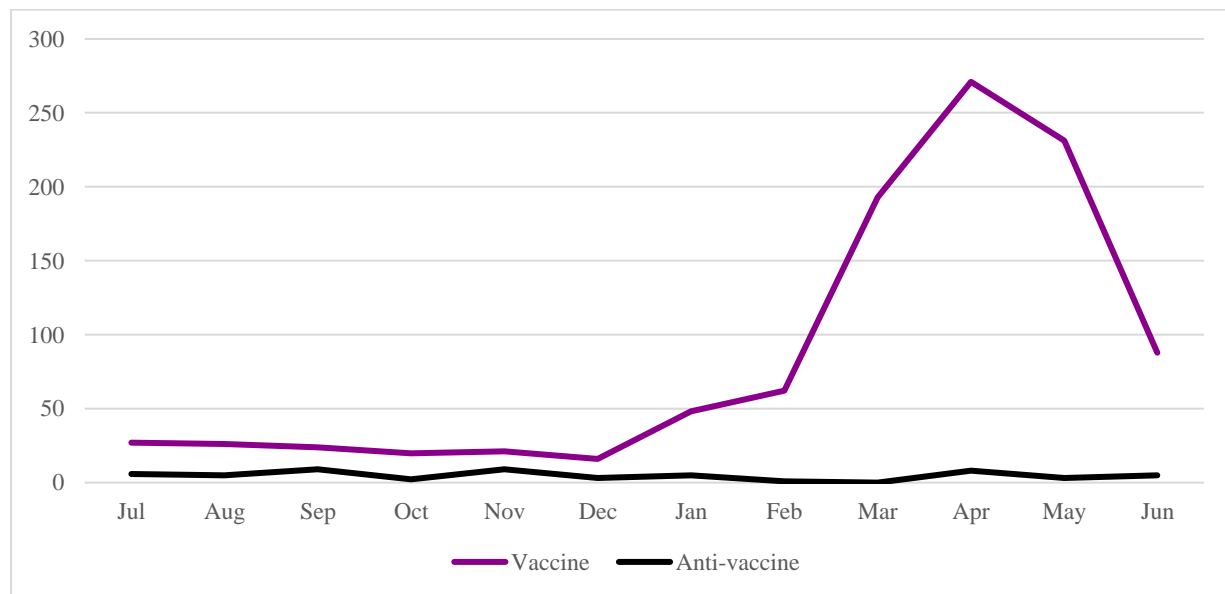
Vaccination

Figure 3: Number of articles mentioning vaccine/vaccination and anti-vaccine published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 3: Number of articles mentioning anti-vaccination and vaccination published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Term	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Anti-vaccination	34	22	56	-35.3
Vaccine/vaccination	134	893	1027	566.4

Both prior to and after the onset of the pandemic, anti-vaccination media-mentions remain very low, averaging a total of five articles a month (Figure 3 and Table 3). Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, vaccine and vaccination were being mentioned by the media at a relatively consistent rate, four times more often than the media mentioned anti-vaccination. With the onset of the pandemic, we see a significant increase in the number of published vaccination articles which peak in the month of April (Figure 3 and Table 3). These results indicate that the anti-vax movement has not received much attention until now. According to a Leger survey conducted in August 2020, 70% of Canadians intend to receive the COVID-19 vaccine once it becomes available and 57% believe it should be mandatory (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020b); the poll also shows that individuals over 55 years old are more likely than those between the ages 18 and 54 to agree with making the vaccine mandatory and are more likely to get vaccinated (see Table 4).

Table 4: Percent of Canadians who agree with the statements outlined in the table (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020b)

	Once a COVID-19 vaccine is available, I will get vaccinated	The COVID-19 Vaccine should be mandatory
18-34 years old	69%	57%
35-54 years old	65%	53%
55+ years old	76%	62%

Figures 1–3 show that key term mentions generally started decreasing in May and June; at the beginning of May and again in June, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Theresa Tam announced that COVID-19 cases throughout Canada were decreasing due to people generally following public health recommendations (Government of Canada, 2020c). The reassurance of Dr. Tam could have led the media to expand their focus beyond the pandemic and its related issues. This decrease could also have been exacerbated by the media shifting its focus from the COVID-19 crisis to issues of racial and social justice due to the killing of George Floyd on May 25 (Dunn, 2020). The solidarity protests that resulted from his death garnered international media attention, including in Canada.

Endnotes

1   "Senior residences", "assisted living", "seniors' homes", "nursing homes" and "retirement homes" are other related terms included in the search.

2   "Anti-vaccine" and "anti-vax" are other related terms included in the search.

3   A poll by Heart & Stroke and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions conducted in September 2019 found that 93% of Canadians support pharmacare and 88% believe it to be the responsibility of the federal government to provide it.

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Appendix 1

On December 31, 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO); these are now known to have been caused by the novel coronavirus (or COVID-19). On January 3, 2020, WHO issued a public warning regarding the virus, and on January 30, it declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020a). Canada first took action on January 15 when the Public Health Agency of Canada activated its Emergency Operation Centre to support the country's response to COVID-19 (Government of Canada, 2020a); by February 9, Canada had implemented screening requirements for travellers returning from all areas affected by the virus to 10 airports in 6 provinces throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2020a; Staples, 2020). On March 11, 2020, WHO declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Following this announcement, the Canadian Government advised Canadians to avoid all non-essential travel outside Canada, required all Canadian travellers entering the country to self-isolate for 14 days, and banned foreign nationals from all other countries, except the United States, from entering Canada (Government of Canada, 2020a). In response to increases in COVID-19 cases throughout the country, one after another, provinces began declaring states of emergency in mid-March (Dawson, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 in Canada was detected in Toronto, Ontario, on January 25, 2020 at which point there were over 1,300 cases confirmed globally. As of August 31, 2020, there have been 128,948 confirmed cases in Canada (114,227 recovered and 9,126 deaths), and over 25 million cases worldwide (848,203 deaths) (Government of Canada, 2020b).

Appendix 2

This briefing note is the result of a larger research project examining the social and economic pressures exerted on government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin (2001) hypothesize that social and economic context shapes the manner in which government regimes act. They define regimes as "the complex of institutional geography, rules, practice and animating ideas that are associated with the regulation of a particular risk or hazard" (p. 9). There are three lenses that Hood et al. use to explore context: (1) the market dynamics, which examine the law, insurance and information and opt-out costs (2) the public's and media's opinions about the risk, which examine polling data and leading media coverage and (3) the role of interests, which examines the concentration of power and influence in affected sectors. The research in this briefing note examines aspects of the second lens, media and public opinion. According to this lens, governments respond to public preferences and attitudes.

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