

10 health stories that mattered: Nov. 22–28

- Veterans Affairs came under fire in the fall 2014 auditor general's report for long wait times for mental health assessments, delays in obtaining medical and service records, and a byzantine application process for disability benefits. The report also criticized the Nutrition North Canada program, which subsidizes the high cost of healthy food in remote communities. The auditor general found that the program bankrolls unhealthy foods and does not properly distribute subsidies or ensure that savings are passed to consumers.
- The federal government will spend \$200 million over six years to expand mental health initiatives for members of the Armed Forces. The plan includes improving the disability benefits application process, and developing a mental health first aid program for veterans and their families.
- The number of incidents of defective prescription medicines in Canada has increased over the last nine years, from 42 in 2005 to 143 in 2013, according to research published in *BMJ Open*. The two most common types of defects were related to the stability and contamination of drugs, leading in some cases to a risk of patients consuming medicines double the stated strength or tainted with foreign substances or bacteria.
- New Brunswick struck down abortion restrictions that require women to seek approval from two doctors and obtain the service from an obstetrician–gynecologist. The change, which comes into effect Jan. 1, 2015, will put abortion in the same category as an insured medical service.
- Vaccine giant Merck reached a deal with NewLink Genetics for the rights to a Canadian-developed Ebola vaccine. Experts recently put pressure on Canada to withdraw from its partnership with NewLink, arguing a bigger company could get the product to the field more quickly.
- Physicians and nurses urged the government to ban an agricultural pesticide linked to bee deaths. According to the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, neonic pesticides may also adversely affect the human nervous system.
- Health Canada warned of the danger of using electronic cigarettes in the presence of an oxygen source. It reported one incident in Quebec in which a person undergoing oxygen therapy was injured in a fire which was sparked by an e-cigarette. The agency said it was aware of similar incidents in other countries.
- Research Canada announced the winners of its inaugural Leadership Award. Dr. Michael Julius, vice president of research at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Russell Williams, president and CEO of Canada's Research Based Pharmaceutical Companies, and the Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia received the award for outstanding health research and innovation.
- Ontarians are healthier than ever, but still face poor access to primary care, Health Quality Ontario reported. Although two-thirds of Ontarians rate their health as excellent or very good, nearly half are inactive and 60% are unable to see their primary care provider on the same or next day when they're sick.
- Nova Scotia reported a spike in the number of suicides and suicide attempts among people under the care of district health authorities. There were 11 suicides or attempts causing serious disability between July and September 2014, up from just one incident between April and June. Nova Scotia's director of health care quality and patient safety says it's too soon to draw conclusions about the numbers. — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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