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Toronto, ON - A new Ipsos Reid poll conducted on behalf of the Canadian Medical Association reveals that nearly four in ten (35%) Prairie and Northern Canadians believe that healthcare is the issue that they would most like the party leaders to address, significantly higher than the proportion who say that jobs and economic growth (24%), debt and deficit reduction (15%), education (12%) and the environment (11%) are the issues they most want to hear about.

In fact, healthcare is a top priority for a plurality of residents in each province: Saskatchewan (39%), Alberta (35%), Nunavut (34%), Manitoba (33%) and the Northwest Territories (28% - the environment, 26%, is a close second) say this is the issue that they most want addressed. Healthcare is in first position among supporters from two of the three major federal parties - NDP (47%), Liberals (40%) - and is in close second for supporters of the Conservatives (29% - only 1 point below economy and growth at 30%).

The perceived importance of healthcare appears to have a noteworthy impact on the way that Prairie and Northern Canadians intend to vote on May 2nd. Two in ten (17%) say that they'd

be 'very likely' – a score of 5 out of 5 – to vote for another party if the one they currently support fails to present a plan for the future of healthcare. NDP (24%) and Liberal (21%) supporters are most likely to say they'd be very likely to defect if their party doesn't provide their plan for the future of healthcare in Canada. One in ten (11%) Conservative supporters say they are 'very likely' to vote for another party.

A strong majority of (76%) Prairie and Northern Canadians believe that 'the federal government's role as custodian of the Canada Health Act – which ensures that Canadians, no matter where they live or their ability to pay, can get medical treatment' – is 'very important'. It's not surprising, then, that seven in ten (69%) believe it is 'very important' that, during the campaign, 'leaders of the federal parties present their plan to ensure that Canadians have a sustainable health care system that meets patient needs'. In a similar vein, seven in ten (69%) think it's 'very important' that, in the context of a federal election, 'each of the party leaders is willing to address the health challenges facing Canadians'.

In 2004 the federal and provincial governments agreed on a health care accord that determined how much the federal government would contribute to the provincial health care systems. This agreement is set to expire in 2014. While Prairie and Northern Canadians acknowledge that a federal role in healthcare is key, they're less convinced about the immediate need for a federal-provincial conference immediately following the election. Still, half (49%) 'strongly agree' that 'it is important that the national parties commit to bringing provincial and territorial premiers together with the next Prime Minister, immediately after the election, to renegotiate the Health Accord that expires in three years'.

Looking to the future, various policy initiatives were presented to Prairie and Northern Canadians to gauge their opinion on the degree to which these initiatives was important:

- Seven in ten (65%) believe it's 'very important' to have a program that will 'ensure that all Canadians have reasonable access to prescription drugs based on their need, not their ability to pay'.
- Six in ten (60%) think it's 'very important' to have a 'long-term care program and facilities for patients who need the assistance and support of a healthcare professional outside of a hospital or their home.
- About half (55%) think it's 'very important' to have a 'home care program that would allow patients to go back to their homes with the assistance of their family or friends'.

But time and resources are not infinite. When forced to choose from among these initiatives, four in ten (38%) believe that a program that ensures universal access to prescription drugs is the most important (46% among those aged 18 to 34), while one in three (33%) believe the home-care initiative is most important (36% of those aged 55+). The long-term care initiative is a close third with 27% saying it is most important from among the three.

These are the findings of an Ipsos Reid poll conducted on behalf of the Canadian Medical Association from April 5-7, 2011. For the survey, a representative randomly-selected sample of 1,201 adult Canadians was interviewed by telephone in the Prairies and Territories. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate to within ± 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult population of the region had been polled. The margin of error will be larger within regions and for other sub-groupings of the survey population. These data were weighted to ensure that the sample's regional and age/sex composition reflects that of the actual population in the region according to Census data. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error.

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