

# Why healthy women are your business

## Employers can address the gender gap in health care with Pacific Blue Cross

Would it surprise you to learn that there is a health care gap for women in British Columbia?

That's the overall conclusion of a new report, *In Her Words: Women's Experience with the Healthcare System in British Columbia*, published by the BC Women's Health Foundation (BCWHF) and proudly sponsored by Pacific Blue Cross.

Women of all ages and socio-economic conditions across the province offered perspectives on their overall health and experiences in the B.C. health care system. The findings were stark: three in 10 reported challenges accessing the health care they needed last year, and just over half felt that a physician had diminished or overlooked their symptoms. The experiences of Indigenous women were even worse; nearly three-quarters felt their needs were not being met.

There are systemic and societal challenges women face when seeking health care. For instance, women have different physiology than men do, yet a great deal of medical research and practice assumes men's and women's bodies are the same. And there is generally not enough focus on women's reproductive health and how women experience a period, a pregnancy or menopause.

"The report builds on a body of research that has shown how the health care system's one-size-fits-all approach to research and treatment has sidelined the specific and unique health needs of women," says Genesa Greening, president and CEO of the



BC Women's Health Foundation. "As a result, women's health concerns often go undiagnosed and untreated."

### Partnering for positive change

"To address a problem, you need to understand the problem, and with the *In Her Words* report we now know that we can do more," says Heidi Worthington, senior vice-president at Pacific Blue Cross.

At Pacific Blue Cross, every decision the organization makes is driven by its mission to improve health and wellbeing for British Columbians. It provides health benefits coverage for one in three people, and up to one in three women, across the province. The organization (including management) is predominantly women, at about 70%. And this fall it was honoured to begin its work with the First Nations Health Authority,

which will support better health outcomes for First Nations women in B.C.

The organization is proud of its new three-year partnership with the BCWHF to help address some of the unique health care needs of women, using its platform as B.C.'s No. 1 health benefits provider to address health care inequities with its clients and members and improve women's health outcomes.

### Virtual care: Improving access for better health

While Pacific Blue Cross does not deliver primary care services, it can help address the health care access issue noted in the report. To that end, starting in 2020 members across its plans will be given the option to access virtual care, which allows them to receive primary care advice

anywhere and any time using their computer or mobile device.

"Virtual care will remove barriers by providing faster access to the support women need and save them the time and costs related to an in-person health care visit," says John Crawford, president and CEO of Pacific Blue Cross.

### Healthy women are your business

The cost of absenteeism has now exceeded \$16 billion annually across Canada, with the average full-time employee in British Columbia absent for nine days a year. Thus, investing in women's health – and that of your staff in general – can have a profound effect on productivity and engagement as well as the recruitment and retention of top talent over the long term.

Pacific Blue Cross will work with plan sponsors to enhance its benefits plans and services for individuals and groups in areas such as access to care, mental health support, and reproductive health and wellbeing.

In addition to benefits plan design changes, there are a number of things organizations across the province can do to effect positive change:

- Recognize that half of your staff have health care needs that aren't being met within our system. Then review your human relations policies, cultural practices, and benefit plan design for biases that further contribute to the inequities.
- Do your part to remove barriers and increase accessibility. Virtual health platforms are an excellent solution.
- Build flexibility into your benefit plans and health and wellness strategies, including health spending accounts and the ability to use extended health care dollars in different ways.
- Create well-rounded benefit plans and wellness strategies that support both physical and mental health.

### Taking action: Building a healthier future for women in B.C.

The research commissioned by the BC Women's Health Foundation has helped to shine a bright light on the issues surrounding women's health care and how we all have a role to play in making changes for the better. The *In Her Words* report has inspired Pacific Blue Cross to do more, and the organization is proud to be on this journey alongside the BCWHF to help close the gender gap.

Let's keep this conversation going. Visit [inherwords.ca](http://inherwords.ca) today to download your free copy of the report. We hope it inspires you to lead the way for change in your own organization.

**Did you know?**

**30% of women report challenges accessing the health care services they need.**

**In Her Words:**  
*Women's Experience with the Healthcare System in BC*  
 — BC Women's Health Foundation

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