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Hon John McCallum, PC MP
Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
minister@cic.gc.ca

RE: Need to expedite access to emergency dental care for Syrian newcomers under Interim Federal Health Program

Dear Minister McCallum:

We are writing to bring to your attention the significant and long delays in the Interim Federal Health (IFH) dental procedure approval process which is causing pain and suffering for many Syrian refugees to Canada. Additionally this is adding to the frustration and administrative burden for the dentists providing oral health care to these newcomers. We would like you to address this problem by taking action to ensure that dental requests sent to Medavie Blue Cross for review are assessed within five business days, instead of the current situation of approximately three months.

Feedback from health care providers indicate that a high number of Syrian refugees to Canada arrive with significant dental needs. Public health units, private dentists and Community Health Centres are working in a number of Ontario communities to try and address these oral health needs effectively as part of successful resettlement in Canada. In many cases they have been attending to the most urgent cases of pain and infection so that people are able to eat and sleep properly, and so that the process of resettlement will be expedited.

The IFH program covers a limited number of dental emergency services for Syrian newcomers for their first year in Canada and is administered by Medavie Blue Cross. We are receiving numerous reports from across Ontario of frustration from dentists who have registered with IFH that it is taking up to three months to get a response from Medavie Blue Cross to their request for approval of necessary dental care.

The process is very slow as private dentists have to send a copy of their assessment and treatment plan to Medavie Blue Cross in New Brunswick and then wait up to three months for a response indicating whether the treatment plan was approved, partially approved, or not approved.

Meanwhile, Syrian newcomers continue to live with dental pain. Because of the intolerable pain, dentists are sometimes forced to extract salvageable teeth against their clinical judgement. The extraction of teeth in these instances is only because of the length of time that dental care providers have to wait for a response from Medavie Blue Cross. Some refugees have expressed disappointment with the system as they feel their health is not valued.

Minister – we are asking for you to intervene and expedite this process. It is normal business practice for dental pre-determinations to be assessed and responded to within five business days. We urge you to address this problem by ensuring that Medavie Blue Cross expedites the review process and assesses pre-determination claims within five business days.

In closing, we commend your government for the strong response to the humanitarian crisis of Syrian refugees and we appreciate your leadership as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, including re-instating health benefits for refugees. We have confidence that you will act quickly to expedite access to emergency dental care for Syrian and other refugees. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

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