

Quebec government left seniors' homes unprotected at start of COVID-19 pandemic

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Quebec's Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, has admitted that authorities were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic and wasted valuable time during its critical first weeks.

These unintentional admissions were made during lengthy testimony Arruda delivered on November 12 and 15 about the impact of the pandemic's first wave on Quebec's public CHSLDs (Residential and Long-Term Care Centres) and private institutions for the elderly. His testimony was given as part of a public inquiry ordered by the Chief Coroner of Quebec.

The inquiry is focused on specific facilities where the first wave had particularly horrific consequences, including the Herron CHSLD in Dorval, a Montreal suburb, where 51 of 150 residents died. But it also includes a review of the "national pandemic management component in CHSLDs" during which Coroner Gehane Kamel heard from Arruda, other senior officials and the then-Minister of Health, Danielle McCann.

Between March and August 2020, 5,200 people died in Quebec's seniors' facilities. This staggering death toll was the principal reason that Quebec, with a population of approximately 8.5 million, had one of the highest per capita death rates in the world during the first wave of the pandemic. Despite this damning record, Arruda used his testimony to defend the management of the pandemic by the province's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government. This is not surprising insofar as the pandemic has revealed Arruda to be a lackey of the government and eager proponent of its profits before lives policy, not an honest scientist.

Willingly or not, Arruda and the other witnesses revealed the total lack of pandemic preparedness. Quebec's director of public health admitted that no concrete measures were put in place in senior centers until March 2020. This despite the fact that the elderly were a particularly vulnerable group (especially as they were

housed up to six to a room in the CHSLDs and other seniors' homes). The government's refusal to act quickly was all the more scandalous given that discussions about the potential risks to the elderly took place at the highest levels of government as early as January.

It was not until March 12 that CHSLDs received a planning guide for COVID-19, and only on April 8 were masks made mandatory in these facilities.

In response, Coroner Kemel stated that she was "troubled" to learn that there had been high-level discussions prior to March 13, since up to that date "preparedness was zero." She added that it was evident from the testimony that the CHSLDs were "anything but ready."

Witnesses described a widespread and glaring lack of masks, other personal protective equipment (PPE) and trained staff. Left to their own devices by a government that did not set aside reserves of PPE for use in the event of a pandemic and failed to place a major order until February 18, 2020, hospitals and other facilities in Quebec's health care system were left to compete for the few masks and other pieces of PPE available.

It was also revealed that Quebec Public Health ordered CHSLDs not to transfer COVID-19 patients to hospitals so as to avoid overwhelming these chronically underfunded facilities. This decision resulted in residents of seniors' homes stricken with COVID not having access to adequate health care or equipment, like ventilators.

This picture of criminal complacency on the part of authorities was confirmed in a special report filed on November 23 by the Quebec Ombudsman, an independent government agency. It concluded that "no concrete and specific action to prepare CHSLDs [was taken] on the ground before mid-March 2020."

In his testimony at the coroner's inquest, Arruda pleaded that it was impossible to prepare for a "historic"

event comparable to the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, and which hit Quebec at a time when its health care system was already “fragile.” He did not mention that it is decades of cuts and capitalist austerity imposed by successive governments, at both the federal and provincial levels, that left Quebec’s health system barely able to meet the day-to-day needs of the population in “normal times,” let alone cope with a pandemic.

Arruda’s claim that the COVID-19 pandemic was an unpredictable event is a flat-out lie. Scientific experts, and even the World Economic Forum, had warned about the danger of a pandemic for years.

Governments in Canada, in particular, have no excuse for being so poorly prepared. The 2002-3 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) provided a serious warning to public authorities. After Canada became the country most affected by SARS outside of Asia, a series of government-commissioned reports highlighted serious flaws in the public health system and recommended measures to prepare for the next pandemic. However, the provincial and federal governments ignored these lessons, refused to implement the reports’ recommendations or quickly shelved them, and continued to make cuts to health care. The problems decried in reports on the 2003 SARS outbreak—staff shortages, inadequate hospital infrastructure and lack of PPE—were all repeated during the COVID-19 pandemic in Quebec and across Canada.

The Quebec Pandemic Influenza Plan prepared in 2006 predicted that 30 percent of health care personnel would be infected and would need to be replaced in the event of a pandemic. However, nothing was done to prepare for such attrition rates. On the contrary, personnel shortages, especially among nurses, have been the norm in Quebec hospitals for years. As a result, the health care system has been facing major shortages of personnel since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his testimony, Arruda admitted that Quebec’s public health agency learned of the new coronavirus as early as December 30, 2019. It was officially notified by the federal government on January 2, 2020. Yet nothing was done until March 12, 2020, when a series of wildcat strikes by workers around the world began shutting down factories, forcing governments, including Quebec’s, to order a limited lockdown. Despite this, Arruda called the Legault government’s response “swift.”

Rather than capitalize on the interval between the outbreak of the coronavirus in China and its arrival in this country, the ruling elite publicly downplayed the danger

in order to preserve corporate profits and avoid a stock market collapse. Once the virus’ spread to Canada became impossible to deny, causing a financial crisis, the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau rushed to funnel \$650 billion to the banks and big business. It then launched, along with governments in every province, an aggressive back-to-work and back-to-school campaign to make the working class pay for the bailout of the financial oligarchy.

Arruda’s testimony confirmed that the Quebec government’s response to the pandemic was based not on science, but on the political and material interests of the ruling class.

For example, it was not until March 18, 2020, that he asked Quebec’s Committee on Nosocomial Infections to conduct a scientific watch for COVID-19. He mentioned that he still relied on the statement made by this same organization before the start of this scientific watch that the disease was transmitted essentially by droplets and not by aerosols.

To explain that masking was not mandated until April 9, 2020, Arruda claimed that until the end of March 2020, there was no consensus that the virus could be transmitted by asymptomatic individuals.

In reality, Arruda and the CAQ government knowingly ignored the warnings of numerous scientists around the world who, as early as February 2020, were warning about transmission by aerosols and asymptomatic people. They also refused to implement the precautionary principle, which would have called for the utmost caution, including implementing measures that might have proved later to be unnecessary, until more was known about the virus.

Arruda defended his actions by saying, “It’s not just science that decides...There are environmental, social, ethical elements to the choices we can make.” It is difficult to better describe the policy of the ruling elite—the “social choice” of prioritizing profits over human lives trumps scientific truth.



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