The picture that emerges is an ill-prepared country with outdated data systems, poor coordination and cohesion, JL and blindness about its citizens’ diverse needs. What saved Canada was a largely willing and conforming populace that withstood stringent public health measures and achieved among the world’s highest levels of vaccination coverage. In other words, Canadians delivered on the pandemic response while its governments faltered.”

That in a nutshell is the consensus of an international review of how our governments handled and mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic, so far.

Calling for an independent national inquiry into Canada’s COVID-19 response, the series of articles by medical experts outlines a series of missteps.

The editorial published in the British Medical Journal introducing the series is headed: “The world expected more of Canada.” In fact, Canada did better than many other countries, but the bar was low.

Understandably, the decision makers will avoid a public inquiry like the plague. While many will point the finger at the federal government, there is ample blame to be shared. Provincial governments are responsible for health care and the implementation of pandemic-related restrictions.

As the BMJ editorial notes, “Canada is among the healthiest and most diverse nations in the world, with free universal healthcare and multiculturalism protected in national law for its population of 40 million people, of whom about a quarter are foreign born and two million are Indigenous peoples.” It continues, “Compared with the shambolic UK response and the chaos and divisiveness of its southern neighbour, the US, Canada may seem to have risen to the occasion of COVID-19. We wouldn’t know because no pandemic inquiry has been established by its federal government. This is a mistake. There are lessons to learn from Canada’s COVID-19 response to ensure accountability for decisions and actions, and to build confidence in the country’s health leadership, which faltered during the pandemic and created a strain on its already beleaguered public health and healthcare systems.” An evaluation two years into the pandemic found the country had lower COVID cases and death burdens and higher vaccination coverage than most other G10 countries, despite Canada’s low hospital and critical care capacity and its vast geographical area that makes care delivery challenging. "But this overall impression of adequacy masks important inequalities by region, setting and demography," adds the report. "As the series sets out, beneath the surface of a general sense of satisfaction lie major pandemic failures’ COVID-19 led directly to 52,750 deaths in Canada with more than 4.6 million reported cases as of mid-2023. This cumulative death rate of 1,372 per million exceeds the global average of 855 per million. Experts found that lessons from the 2003’s SARS-CoV-1 outbreak had not been heeded and Canada’s governments and health authorities were ill-prepared for COVID-19, with fragmented health leadership hindering a coordinated response. Despite a universal healthcare system, communities experiencing social and economic marginalization in Canada were hardest hit in each wave of the pandemic, and those living and working in long-term care homes were particularly affected, which led to a national shame, say the researchers."
There is clear, and tragic evidence, that governments failed longterm care facility residents, staff and their families.

In the initial stages of the outbreak, governments' rapid response was likened to "building an airplane while flying it."

The study "found glaring failures, particularly due to longstanding weaknesses in Canada's public health care systems plus poor data sharing and communication between provincial and federal governments." At one point in the initial stages of the pandemic, everyone was hoarding and not just toilet paper.

When vaccines became available, the masses rolled up their sleeves, and governments began stockpiling vaccines.

"Canada has inexcusably failed to participate in efforts to promote global vaccine equity by hoarding vaccines when equitable distribution was most needed, by hampering multilateral efforts to prevent something like this from happening again, and also by deferring to the pharmaceutical industry in national pharma, council policy stances," says Roojin Habibi, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa, who contributed to the series. "A million lives in 2021 alone might have been saved in poorer countries had rich nations like Canada shared more covid vaccine," the series notes. "Are such losses not worth preventing in the future?" Meanwhile, one COVID-related death was reported in July in the region served by the Eastern Ontario Health Unit, where to date 306 people had succumbed to the virus. We are still being reminded that another shot of vaccine would be beneficial. Experts warn that when it comes to global pandemics, it is a matter of "when" and not "if."

There is much to be learned from COVID19. A full probe of governments' actions and inactions is the most effective prescription for restoring the public's eroded confidence in our systems. But politicians at the federal and provincial levels will not want to swallow that bitter pill. Richard Mahoney richard@theglengarrynews.org Pandemic continues to take lives