

CANADA'S BEST KEPT SECRET REVEALED

PUBLIC HEALTH CARE GIVES CANADA AN ECONOMIC ADVANTAGE – DESPITE THE HIGH DOLLAR

by Guy Caron and Jan Malek

With a Canadian dollar exchanging almost at par with the U.S. greenback, grumblings are being heard from many corporate boardrooms that Canadian businesses have lost a major edge over U.S. competitors.

This analysis neglects an important point: As the recent United Auto Workers-General Motors collective agreement reminds us, Canadian companies don't have to deal with the health care headaches of our neighbours – or with the costs. Indeed, the fact that Canadian companies, large and small, don't have to offer health benefits to compete for the most talented and productive workers explains in large part why we are still largely competitive in the NAFTA era – despite our skyrocketing dollar.

Convincing proof of Canada's health care advantage comes from a 1999 briefing published by The Conference Board of Canada titled "Corporate Health Care Costs in Canada and the U.S.: Does Canada's Medicare System Make a Difference?"

The study compares similar U.S. and Canadian companies in four different industrial sectors: business services, pharmaceuticals and chemicals, automobile, and information technology. It confirms the existence of a competitive advantage in Canada's publicly funded health care system, demonstrating that employers' total health care expenditures for private and public health

CANADIAN COMPANIES DON'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE HEALTH CARE HEADACHES OF OUR NEIGHBOURS – OR WITH THE COSTS.

benefits are substantially lower in Canada than in the United States.

Even though taxes and contributions to legislated health care benefits are higher in Canada, these costs do not offset the significantly higher cost of employer-sponsored benefits in the U.S.

COSY ADVANTAGE

In a 2003 interview with *Alberta Venture* magazine, Alberta businessman Ken Stickland summarized it well by saying that Canadian businesses don't know how lucky they are to operate in a country with universal health care.

"If I don't have a firm or a division in the States and if my sales are a hundred per cent to the domestic market, it is certainly easy for me to think it doesn't have an effect. But once you get the rumble of external competition coming into your previously cosy little business, you might become more aware of it. It is clearly an advantage," he pointed out.

The Council of Canadians has just launched a new campaign to spread the message that public health care offers Canadian businesses and citizens a true competitive advantage. Best Kept Secret: Canada's Health Care Competitive Advantage will reach out to small and medium-sized businesses, community groups and other local organizations to encourage them to fight to protect and enhance public health care in Canada.

Representatives from more than 30 Council of Canadians chapters and coalition partners have selected public speakers who will be participating in training sessions in cities across Canada over the next few months. Presenters will be equipped with a specialized speech, PowerPoint presentation and extensive resource guide that they can take into their communities.

The 30-minute presentations have been designed to generate discussion, and to provide clear evidence not only of the economic advantages of public health care, but also of the benefits of public insurance and non-profit delivery of health care services. We will also provide evidence to debunk myths spouted by people like Canadian Medical Association President Dr. Brian Day, who are pushing for health care privatization.

Of course, we want to do more than just convince the audience. When meeting with a group of business people, we will encourage them to network with each other, forming a "Businesses for Public Health Care" group. Adding a "business voice" in favour of public health care will go a long way to convincing the federal government that all Canadians will benefit from the expansion of public health care.

LOGICAL CHOICE

For Canadian businesses, and especially small and medium-sized companies, the only logical choice is to demand that the Canadian government maintain a strong public universal insurance program and non-profit delivery of health services. It is in all of our interests to ensure that health care delivery and insurance remain, as far as possible, in public, non-profit hands.

Guy Caron is the Health Campaigner, and Jan Malek is a Communications Administrator at the Council of Canadians.