

PROVINCES PUSH PRIVATIZATION

PUBLIC HEALTH CARE IN JEOPARDY AS HARPER GOVERNMENT STANDS IDLY BY

By Jan Malek

Canada's public health care program is facing slow erosion as provinces across the country allow creeping privatization to seep in, and the Harper government is showing no willingness to stop it.

The federal government oversees the Canada Health Act, which is the national legislation that is supposed to ensure all Canadians have equal access to health care services anywhere in the country. Every year, the federal government is required by law to bring a report on violations of the Canada Health Act to Parliament. But what most people don't realize is that the government relies on the provinces to tell them when violations occur. There is no impetus or incentive for provinces to report violations – in fact, doing so could make them lose money in the form of transfer payments. As a result, several provinces opt not to report anything at all.

As we can see from examples across the country, there is a move away from a national federal health program to a situation where provinces make their own rules about health care.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

The B.C. government continues to be one of the most aggressive in its push to open public health care to the market. British Columbia is home to a large number of private clinics (estimated at more than 70), including, arguably, some of the worst offenders to the letter and the spirit of the Canada Health Act.

The Campbell government has recently introduced the idea of adding “sustainability” to the list of principles guiding its so-called medicare protection legislation. So what does sustainability mean



Tony Tracy

Council of Canadians representatives Krista Simon and Leo Broderick (both at right) join other public health care supporters at a rally in May protesting the Nova Scotia government's decision to pay the private for-profit clinic Scotia Surgery Inc. to perform surgeries.

in the context of health care? To the Campbell government it makes health care all about the money. As one B.C. columnist recently pointed out, “sustainability” could create the legislative platform for denying patients' medically necessary treatments, or closing hospitals, and of course, privatization.

ALBERTA

In Alberta we are also seeing an increase in health care privatization. Businessman Donald Copeman has recently announced his plans to open a clinic there which, like his Vancouver-based business, will require people to make a payment before they can see a doctor.

The Alberta government is also looking at user fees and de-listing medically necessary health care services – all breaches of the Canada Health Act.

QUEBEC

Quebec is another ground zero for health care privatization. With a proliferation of private clinics – particularly diagnostic clinics, a provincial govern-

ment that favours health care privatization, and the refusal of the Quebec government to provide any kind of report to the federal government under the Canada Health Act, public health care faces serious threats in this province.

The Castonguay report, released in February 2008 by the Quebec Task Force on the Funding of the Health Care System, calls for an increased role for private insurance, the establishment of user fees, and a provision to allow doctors to practise in both the public and the private systems—all clear breaches of the Canada Health Act.

NOVA SCOTIA

Recently Nova Scotia Health Minister Chris d'Entremont announced that the province will use \$1 million of public funds to pay a private surgical clinic to perform 500 orthopedic surgeries. Defending it as a move to reduce wait times, Minister d'Entremont said the contract poses no threat to public health care.

We say otherwise. Using public money to pay private clinic profits gives private health providers exactly what they are looking for – patients and a revenue stream.

GOVERNMENT IS SILENT

These are just some of the many examples of how provincial governments are moving toward and allowing the privatization of Canada's national medical program. Even more alarming is the fact that since being elected in January 2006, federal Health Minister Tony Clement and the Harper government have been completely silent on the issue, leaving private health care to flourish with their silent blessing.

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