

HEALTH CARE REFORM

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The National Post, August 6, 2006

As the Canadian Medical Association gathers for its annual meeting in Charlottetown our nation's physicians are preparing to discuss issues important to the future of our health care system. At the same time, members of the national Liberal Caucus are gathering in Vancouver to discuss policy issues and prepare for the upcoming session of Parliament.

What Canadians need to hear from both groups – particularly since the current government has failed in their promise to articulate their vision for health care reform -- are "rhetoric-free" proposals to end the status quo.

The party whose leadership I am seeking, and physician leaders, must start by committing to save single tier, universally accessible publicly-funded health care in Canada. It is a Canadian symbol of equality and opportunity for all Canadians, regardless of wealth. It is a fundamental representation of those principles. It is something Canadians have been immensely proud of, for decades. But we're losing it---fast.

The Chaoulli decision forced a response to failures in the system. Money alone will not solve the problems. Our government should confirm our social priorities, and then address them by spending tax dollars as efficiently as possible, without sacrificing the quality of care. Instead, we get a wait times "guarantee".

It sounds good at first—if you don't get what you need within a certain period of time; we'll send you to another province, even to the US, for treatment. This is

not an effective use of our limited financial resources. It is a frustrating example of a politically motivated and expensive band-aid solution to a much deeper challenge to our system.

Wait times are unacceptable. Period.

Solving them – and the many complex problems facing our health care system – has to start with an honest discussion of the issues. To do anything less represents a failure of leadership and Canadians deserve better.

We must start by re-framing the discussion. We must get away from terminology, rhetoric and labels that promote fear and distort the truth. For too long, the word “private” has been used as a blunt instrument by political leaders to score political points, and as a scare tactic equated with trying to destroy our health care system.

It is time we had an honest, meaningful discussion about the role of the private sector in the delivery of health care in a publicly funded, single-tier system. By characterizing health care reform solely in the context of private vs. public, we are limiting ourselves and distorting the discussion. When most people hear the word “private”, they picture large multi-shareholder owned, corporate-run hospitals and private insurance-driven HMOs (“health maintenance organizations”). Canadians don’t want this type of US-style health care and neither do I.

Private does not and need not mean two-tier.

Look no further for an excellent example of private health care delivery care in Canada than the family physician -- small business people with offices to run and payroll to meet. But, increasingly they are preoccupied by growing numbers in the waiting room, less time to spend with patients, efforts to minimize red tape, and inefficiencies which shrink their income. Stretched to the limit, the

family physician is a disappearing commodity and an increasingly unattractive option for future doctors. This important group on the front lines of health care needs our support or the growing thousands of Canadians without a family physician will have nowhere to turn for primary care.

There are other examples of excellent and efficiently run private delivery in the public system, such as the Shouldice Hernia Centre in Ontario where the profit motive does not mean cutting corners and reducing standards. As with the family physician, the motive is to provide excellent care and service, and do it as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible.

There are tremendous benefits to doing one thing and doing it well. In addition to focusing on increased specialization, we should be looking to democracies with values similar to ours and learning from them. By learning from others – both their mistakes and their successes –and by working together, we can ensure the sustainability of our health care system.

Canadians are best served by an honest discussion – which includes an examination of best practices worldwide -- rather than politically-motivated debates.

Lack of political courage has kept us from engaging Canadians in this discussion, and has prevented us from really being honest in looking for solutions. In the meantime, two-tier health care is already starting to happen in this country and this is worrisome. I will not pretend to have all of the solutions, or the specific answers as to how to make best use of the private sector. But I do know that we won't reach those solutions unless we show the political courage necessary to engage in the honest discussion we urgently need.