

## **No crisis in health system, report says**

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(The report, titled Revitalizing Medicare: Shared problems, Public Solutions can be obtained by visiting <http://www.tommydouglas.ca/>)

By HELEN DOLIK  
Globe and Mail Update

Canada's medicare system is not in crisis and the problems are fixable, a new study released Thursday says.

"There are major problems affecting our health care system, but it's not a crisis," said Dr. Michael Rachlis, one of the report's authors. "We want people to realize that the problems that medicare has are things that we can fix.

"In fact, they're a lot easier to fix within a publicly funded system that has a focus on not-for-profit delivery than it would be to fix a private system. If you want to see a crisis, the U.S. has a crisis. We have problems we can fix."

The report, titled Revitalizing Medicare: Shared problems, Public Solutions, was released by the Tommy Douglas Research Institute.

Medicare is being renewed and can be renewed, Dr. Rachlis said.

"If we were to take the best of each province's programs and spread them rapidly across the country, there would be much less of a sense of crisis and Canadians would have what they want – which is a publicly financed system that has not-for-profit delivery of service," he said.

As an example, he mentioned a successful palliative-care program in Edmonton that has reduced to less than 50 per cent the proportion of cancer patients dying in acute-care hospital beds. The patients were getting better symptom relief and families felt better, he said. If used across the country, he added, it would make 2,000 hospital beds available.

"Most Canadians want to fix medicare they don't want to junk it," Dr.

Rachlis said.

He said Tommy Douglas talked about the two stages to medicare: The first stage is the public payment for a mainly private system and the second stage is keeping people healthy to begin with and not simply treating people after they are sick.

"It's time to move on to that second stage of medicare, to preserve it for the future," Dr. Rachlis said.

Ontario nurses supported the report's view that the medicare system must be sustained and strengthened.

But it is imperative that Canadians recognize our health care system is in trouble and the nursing shortage is getting worse, says Lesley Bell, chief executive officer of the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA). ONA represents 45,000 front-line registered nurses and health professionals working in hospitals, community health and long-term-care facilities across the province.

"Medicare is the foundation of our health care system and we must preserve and maintain it," Ms. Bell said. "We must not only fight for its survival, we must strengthen it by incorporating community and long-term-care health services to ensure full access to care for all Canadians in every sector of the health care system."

In Ontario, the government must stop reacting to crisis after crisis and start planning for some real reform, she said.

Ontario nurses say the solution is to stop further privatization of health services and to create a strong primary health care system that ensures Canadians can get the care they need 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The government must also improve working conditions for nurses and the problems created by understaffing, create full-time nursing jobs and increase job security, the association said in a statement.

NDP Leader Alexa McDonough said she believes there is a crisis in health care.

"The right wingers are feasting on the health care crisis for the very purpose of cannibalizing our universal health care system and privatizing it," she said.

The Ontario Medical Association said, however, that patients experience "extreme problems" daily in accessing health care.

"They are not only waiting far too long for emergency care, cancer care and heart surgery, but are even being sent out of the country for treatment," OMA president Dr. Albert Schumacher said. "Patients and their families, physicians, nurses and other health care professionals all have daily first-hand experience with the serious lack of human resources, medical technology and hospital beds in the health-care system."

There is a "serious disconnect between what the institute's academics are reporting and what patients and health care professionals are experiencing at the front-lines," he said. The OMA said the following facts indicate the current problems in health-care in Ontario:

Dr. Robert McKendry, commissioned by the Ontario government, stated in December 1999 that 1,000 additional physicians are needed in Ontario. The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has designated 109 communities underserved in Ontario, including northern and rural areas as well as large urban centres such as Windsor and Kitchener-Waterloo. The population is growing at a rate of approximately 1% per cent per year, and the rate of growth of the elderly population is almost twice that rate. Patients in their 70s normally use five or six time more medical health services per capita annually than patients in their 30s and 40s. Physicians are aging as well and retiring, at a rate greater than new physicians coming into practice.

Using detailed demographic data and estimates of health care spending, the Conference Board of Canada expects Ontario's health care costs to more than double over the next 20 years, rising to almost half of total government expenditures. According to the Board, this health-care expenditure would not be sustainable in light of other government costs. New physicians are no longer working 80 hours per week as their older colleagues have. More physicians are needed to provide the appropriate amount of care to the population.

Canada does not fare well in the availability of medical technology, such as MRI and CT scans, in comparison to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

Responses to The Tommy Douglas Foundation Report can be found at:

The Canadian Medical Association website at  
[www.cma.ca/advocacy/news/2001/01-25.htm](http://www.cma.ca/advocacy/news/2001/01-25.htm)

The Ontario Medical Association website at  
[www.oma.org/pcomm/pressrel/pr240101.htm](http://www.oma.org/pcomm/pressrel/pr240101.htm)