

College of Physicians and Surgeons Should Vote Down Policy Permitting Patient Charges

Medical Reform Group

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On November 25, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario is about to make a crucial policy decision concerning "block fees." - flat fees charged in advance by doctors for services not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan. The Medical Reform Group is now publicly urging the College to ban the practice of charging block fees..

"The College knows that many doctors violate the existing block fees policy," said Dr. Irfan Dhalla, a spokesperson for the MRG. "For example, doctors have asked patients to pay a fee before allowing them to join the practice. Everyone agrees that this is unacceptable. The College has acknowledged that it cannot actively monitor and enforce their block fee regulations. Protecting patients requires the College to ban block fees altogether."

Under both the current and proposed policies, physicians are allowed to charge patients for uninsured services (e.g., telephone prescription renewals, completing forms for summer camp, etc.) either individually or with an annual flat fee. Under the flat fee policy, patients often pay for services they never use. The College has proposed a new draft policy that allows patients to refuse to pay the fee, and bans physicians from penalizing patients who refuse to pay the block fee.

"The College's regulations might work in a dream world, but we live in a province with a severe physician shortage" said Dr. Gordon Guyatt, another spokesperson for the MRG. "Patients are terribly dependant on their doctors. It is completely unrealistic to expect patients to risk upsetting their doctors saying 'no' to the block fee."

According to the College, recent violations of the block fees policy include:

- Doctors charging block fees as a condition of being accepted into a practice
- Making patients pay for services that are covered by OHIP (for example, requiring payment for a specialist referral)
- Terminating patients from a practice for not paying a block fee
- Not responding to telephone messages from patients who refuse to pay the block fee

"Block fees benefit doctors but not patients," said Dr. Dhalla. "If the College does not ban block fees, they are failing their responsibility to protect the public."