

MRG Challenges Alan Rock to Enforce Canada Health Act

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The MRG today delivered an open letter to Alan Rock, urging the federal health minister to enforce the Canada Health Act. The Act stipulates that the federal government penalize provinces that allow user charges for insured physician and hospital services. For each dollar of user fees, the federal government should be withholding a dollar of transfer payments to the province.

Many observers -- most recently Senator Michael Kirby, in his committee's report -- have chided the federal government for its reluctance to enforce the act. The result is widespread user charges for insured services across the country.

The MRG challenge focussed on two existing violations, and one new threat.

"In January, the MRG congratulated you on your decision to deal with New Brunswick's refusal to pay for abortion services in private clinics by enforcing the Canada Health Act," the MRG letter states. "We have heard nothing of this issue since. Were our congratulations misplaced? What are you doing to resolve the barrier to a crucial medical service that New Brunswick women now face."

"You are well aware of private magnetic resonance imaging facilities that allow those who can pay to jump the public queue," the MRG letter continues. "You must understand that this represents two-tiered medicine at its worst. Why do you take no action to deal with the problem?"

The MRG notes that the federal government's passive approach to the Canada Health Act enforcement had emboldened Quebec radiologists to threaten another overt violation. Quebec radiologists have voted to charge patients a \$4-per-X-ray fee as early as December, if the provincial government does not buy much-needed diagnostic machines.

"Will you also stand by idly if Quebec radiologists implement their threatened user charges? Each succeeding decision to turn a blind eye to

violations provides reassurance to those who undermine the fundamental principle of our public health care system – equitable access."

The MRG awaits the health minister's reply.

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