

New Health Care Commission: Opportunity and Risk

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Jean Chretien has asked Roy Romanow to lead a Royal Commission to take a fresh look at our health care system, and determine the directions it should take. The Commission hearings are likely to play out as a battle between those who see an opportunity to extend public health care, and those who see a chance for privatization.

Some facts about the system are evident. Hospital costs as a proportion of total health care costs have decreased, home care and prescription drug costs increased. As a result, more of our health care expenditures (about 30%) are from private sources than a decade ago (when public to private was 75% to 25%).

Other facts are less evident. Many characterize health care costs as spiralling out of control. "That's not the reality," said MRG spokesperson Gordon Guyatt. "On a per capita basis, we're spending no more than we were in 1992. Recent increases in public expenditure have just made up for years of cutbacks. In 1992, we were spending 10.2% of our gross domestic product on health care. Today, we're spending 9.2% of our GDP on health care."

In 1997, the National Health Forum took the same broad look at the system that Mr. Romanow is planning. "The Forum reaffirmed the efficiency and equity of public funding, and non-for-profit health care delivery," said MRG spokesperson Rosana Pellizarri, "and recommended national home care and pharmacare programs. They had the prescription right."

Not according to Alberta health minister Gary Mar. "If it's about pharmacare, if it's about primary care...we're not interested." Mr. Mar used the latest code word for privatization, "sustainability" to characterize his preferred direction for the commission.

It is certain that Canada will be spending more money on health care in the next decade. The question is whether the beneficiaries will be insurance companies, for-profit health care providers, and affluent Canadians who can pay out of pocket for better, quicker care; or will it be

the Canadian public who shares the benefits. The Commissions conclusions will play a major part in providing the answer.