

## **Solution to federal–provincial bickering over health**

Hamilton Spectator and Straight Goods June 13, 2003

**By Dr. Gordon Guyatt**

**(Spectator title: Independent Health Council is best for Canada)**

Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and his health minister, Gary Mar, are frightened of the truth. That is why they are trying to kill the idea of an independent body of experts to monitor Canada's health care system.

From 1995 to 2002, federal and provincial politicians betrayed the Canadian principles of universal high quality health care. In 1995, the federal government hid huge cuts in health care funding to provinces by rolling transfers for health, education and welfare into a single Canadian Health and Social Transfer. The cuts led to a dramatic reduction in public health care funding.

By 2000, deficit hysteria was passing. Instead of rescuing the health care system, federal and provincial politicians made tax cuts their top priority. Then, they engaged in what Health Commissioner Roy Romanow called "corrosive and unproductive long–distance hollering and finger–pointing."

"The health system is falling apart because of lack of federal money," said the provinces. "The health system is falling apart because provinces are wasting federal money," said Ottawa.

Meanwhile, governments helped promote a big lie. They suggested that health care spending was out of control, there wasn't enough public money, and we had to make Canadians pay privately.

Roy Romanow cut through the deception and confusion.

First, he listened to Canadian values. Shared security in a high–quality health care system remains a top priority of ordinary Canadians.

Second, he recognized that, as a percentage of GDP, Canada is spending less than a decade ago. Romanow noted that provincial and federal governments were losing over \$40 billion in income each year because of

tax cuts. He saw the large surplus the federal government was generating despite tax cuts. Romanow concluded that if we want to make it a priority, we have plenty of money for health care.

Third, he looked at the evidence. He saw that single-payer public health care financing is both efficient and equitable. And that investor-owned private for-profit health care delivery threatens our health.

So, he recommended much more federal money for health care. The money would be used to create big changes, including a move toward national home care and prescription drug (pharmacare) programs, and a reformed system of front-line care.

On February 3, 2003, federal and provincial governments agreed to put Romanow into action. But their accord left a major gap. The provinces could still use new federal money for tax cuts rather than improving health care. The money they did spend on health could be used to shore up the old system instead of, as intended, creating real change.

Romanow foresaw this problem of accountability, and his recommendations included a national Health Council including public representatives, academic experts in health care, and experienced health care managers.

The 2003 federal-provincial accord included a Romanow-style Canadian Health Council to be put in place by May 5.

May 5? Now it's the middle of June, and still no Health Council. Why?

Romanow saw that the Health Council would be a way of dealing with political bickering. The public would have a trustworthy guardian of the health care system who would tell them who is doing the job, and who is not. If the provinces, or Ottawa, weren't true to the accord, the Council would let Canadians know.

Romanow also saw that, to succeed in highlighting government misrepresentations, the Council must include experts and public representatives. Misrepresentations such as claims that there is a shortage of public money for health care, a need for a private pay system, and that investor-owned private for-profit health care delivery is more

efficient.

Ralph Klein and Gary Mar also realize that an independent Council will expose their political games. That is why they want to kill the Council. These Alberta leaders have no commitment to carrying through Romanow's principles. They have no commitment to national programs of publicly funded home care and pharmacare, and they want to see expansion of investor-owned for-profit health care provision.

So they want a Council made up of government representatives rather than an independent body. Clearly, that would destroy its credibility and usefulness as an independent watchdog. Filled with federal and provincial government representatives, the council would be another forum for bickering.

Klein and Mar want a sunset clause for the council, which would last only the five years of the current accord. They want a miniscule \$2 million budget, instead of the proposed \$20 million that would allow the council to fulfill a wider mandate.

The overlapping health responsibilities of the federal and provincial governments have created an unworkable situation. An independent national Health Council represents a desperately needed solution. In his phase of born-again Prime Minister doing what is best for the country, Jean Chrétien may override provincial objections and create an independent health council. If he doesn't, health care will remain in big trouble.