

## **MDs' group should stand firmly by medicare**

Canada's doctors have chance to let us know if they stand for equal treatment for all.

**By Irfan Dhalla**

This week, the Canadian Medical Association faces an historic choice. In a planned debate on privatization, the nation's doctors have the opportunity to decide whether they stand alongside their patients in the effort to preserve equitable health care for all Canadians.

Last month's Supreme Court ruling to permit private health insurance in Quebec makes the CMA debate particularly critical. Even before that decision, the agenda of the doctors' annual meeting in Edmonton included resolutions that appear to call for increased health-care privatization.

After the Chaoulli decision, a 4-3 Supreme Court ruling arguing that waiting lists in Quebec have become so long that citizens cannot fairly be denied the opportunity to purchase private insurance, the doctors have added a special session to their meeting.

The agenda and background information for this session are for doctors' eyes only; while much of the information on the CMA website is available to the public, only physicians can read what the CMA's lawyers think of the Chaoulli decision.

So far, the CMA has officially stood behind the Canada Health Act's principles. Intervening in the Chaoulli case, it argued that there are "strong indications that solutions exist in a public health-care system that will extend a commitment to timely access to medically necessary health care."

But at the same time, some representatives of the CMA have made statements that cater to the small but vocal camp of physicians who clamour for increased health-care privatization.

Albert Schumacher, current president of the CMA, just last month told the British Columbia Medical Association that "private health care is not some bogeyman to be trotted out during an election campaign. We need a real debate on the role it has played, continues to play and will play in our system to advance the health of all Canadians."

For years, the call for debate has been a cover for attempts to undermine medicare. In fact, Canada has had the debate repeatedly, culminating in the Kirby and Romanow reports of 2002. Both of these well-researched documents concluded that public funding of universal health care is not only more equitable,

but also more efficient than private alternatives. Medicare plays an important role in producing Canada's overall health outcomes, which are among the best in the world.

After studying the full range of health-care systems around the globe, Roy Romanow concluded that Canadians would be best served by a reinvigorated medicare in which governments continue to fund care and public, or non-profit providers continue to deliver it to all Canadians under uniform terms and conditions.

Proponents of privatized medicine point to countries like France, Germany and Sweden, all of which tolerate a small, tightly-regulated private health-care industry. But what the privatization proponents do not tell you is that countries like France, Germany and Sweden fund an even greater proportion of health-care expenditures from the public purse than does Canada.

And, unlike those three states, we share the world's longest undefended border with a country that believes personal liberty should always trump the collective pursuit of happiness.

Romanow discovered that Canadians take a more balanced approach, and that's why he entitled his report *Building on Values*. A significant private sector role in our health-care system would resemble the Houstonian model much more closely than the Parisian one - massive corporations with megabuck CEOs, geographically removed 9-to-5ers making clinical judgments on behalf of shareholders instead of patients, and pervasive marketing campaigns that will be so dominating that our very values may change.

The CMA last visited the public-private debate 10 years ago, and came to the right conclusion.

One of the most vocal supporters of the Canada Health Act was Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai, a pediatric cardiologist from Edmonton. Here's what she told her colleagues: "Who would benefit from increasing privatization? Those who could afford private health care, and those who provide it, including doctors and insurance companies. But, the majority of people could not afford private care, and they are the vast majority requiring the most care.

"So, the minority of patients, the wealthy, would pay for more choice, and the majority of patients would receive less choice and less quality in the public system as the private system gradually skimmed (off) the best physicians, equipment, facilities and other health-care providers."

Never heard of Collins-Nakai? You will. She's smart, she's a natural leader, and she's an Albertan.

This week she also takes over as president of the CMA. Let's hope for the sake of ordinary Canadians that Collins-Nakai is as eloquent in 2005 as she was in 1995, and that she is able to persuade the CMA's delegates that solutions to our health-care system's problems are attainable within the public system.

Then our nation's doctors will truly be standing alongside their patients.

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