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Quebec escapes fines

Three other provinces dinged for violations

By AARON DERFEL

Health Canada officials expressed concerns last year about allegations of illegal user charges by private clinics in Quebec, but no fines were ever levied, a federal report reveals.

Meanwhile, three other provinces - British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland - were fined for violations of the Canada Health Act, according to the report.

Ottawa deducts amounts from health transfer payments to provinces it deems have failed to crack down on doctors involved in illegal extra billing and user charges. The report notes that British Columbia was fined more than \$72,000 last year for such violations. In total, B.C. has been fined \$2.2 million since 1994.

In contrast, Quebec has never been fined, even though Health Canada has repeatedly warned the province about doctors who flout the law by billing both medicare and their patients.

The last warning was delivered in February 2005 in a meeting with representatives from the Quebec Health Department.

"Health Canada communicated ... concerns about (publicly) insured persons being charged for health services," the report states.

Quebec officials responded that any investigations by the provincial medicare board into alleged violations are kept confidential.

"They added that there had been no recent patient complaints, but were unable to confirm that the situation had been resolved."

The meeting came after The Gazette published an article that showed that at two private clinics in Westmount Square, patients paid substantial "facility" fees to gain quick access to surgery and other medical procedures.

Doctors at those clinics also billed the Regie de l'assurance-maladie du Quebec.

Michael McBane, national co-ordinator of the Canadian Health Coalition, accused both Ottawa and Quebec of failing to police the Canada Health Act.

"Both governments are looking the other way when there are violations," McBane said.

"This is a slow road to an Americanized health system."

He added that he can't understand why Prime Minister Stephen Harper has urged Alberta to uphold a public health-care system, but is refusing to hold Quebec to the same standard.

(The report covered the 2004-05 fiscal year, when the Liberals were in power, but is signed by Conservative Health Minister Tony Clement.)

Paul Saba, a Montreal general practitioner and member of the group Physicians for Social Justice, said doctors shouldn't be allowed to double-dip by practising in the public and private systems.

"Failing to act on these abuses is tantamount to accepting and encouraging a two-tier system," Saba said.

Isabelle Merizzi, an aide to Quebec Health Minister Philippe Couillard, dismissed suggestions that the province is turning a blind eye to medicare violations by doctors.

"We respect the Canada Health Act and adhere to its principles," Merizzi said.

She added that RAMQ, the medicare board, can only investigate if it receives complaints from the public.

However, patients who pay to jump the queue are unlikely to complain to the government.

Last year, Cathy Rouleau - now a senior aide to Couillard - suggested that the law might be changed to allow RAMQ to investigate in the absence of complaints. That law has not been changed.