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Former central bank governor questions proposal for competition in medicare

By Dennis Bueckert, Canadian Press

OTTAWA (CP) - The former governor of Canada's central bank has made an unusual foray into the political fray over health care, questioning proposals for greater competition within the single-payer medicare system.

"I must say I'm having trouble envisioning how the competitive process works with a single payer," Gordon Thiessen told Senators Michael Kirby and Wilbert Keon at a forum organized to discuss their report on medicare.

In a study this week, Kirby and Keon say they support Canada's single-payer health system, in which government funds all essential services, but they argue that competition among hospitals and clinics is needed to improve productivity. Thiessen said the competitive model usually "has many suppliers and many buyers and you have this array of packages of services being offered and that tends to stimulate the process."

"Where you've simply got a single payer it's really difficult for me to see exactly how the process works," he told the forum organized by the two senators Wednesday.

"Can you just provide some examples of how you think this system will work so that you do get productivity gains, so competition really does work with a single payer?"

In his reply Keon seemed to suggest the answer may lie in a parallel, private health system - a possibility he and Kirby say they oppose. "There's no question, there's a large body of people in the country now that want an alternate payer and an alternate provider that is strictly private," he said.

"There are two huge forces, I think, converging now that will help this get implemented. One is that the provinces are going bankrupt and the second is the opinion polls about satisfaction with health care delivery in Canada just keep sliding."

A member of the audience who described herself as a former health professional, said the introduction of competition into home-care nursing has come as a significant cost to patients.

"Since then I have seen erosion in the quality of life experienced by disabled people and seniors in their homes in the home-care programs. A large proportion of supposed nursing outreach is done by lower cost professionals with less training, less capacity. I can't see anyone in this room wanting to be the recipient of health care delivered by a less qualified person."

The Canadian Nurses Association said in a news release Thursday the Keon-Kirby report raises many unanswered questions, given the shortage of nurses.

Albert Schumacher, president of the Canadian Medical Association, said hospitals and doctors have made great productivity gains over the past 20 years, doing procedures in a fraction of the time they once did.

"When they're talking about more productivity, it has already increased," Schumacher said in an interview.

He said it makes little sense to talk of doctors competing with each other when there are not enough doctors to go around.