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# Health lobby blasts DND for outsourcing care

## Group says public system undermined by contract with Ottawa technology firm

By Glen McGregor and Bert Hill

The federal government is undermining the public health system by allowing the Department of National Defence to outsource medical care for Canadian soldiers to a private company, a health lobby group says.

The Canadian Health Coalition yesterday denounced the decision by DND to contract out health care for military personnel to an Ottawa technology firm, saying the move conflicts with Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh's claim to oppose privatization of health services.

"The federal government needs to lead by example in supporting public health care and stemming the tide of privatization," said Michael McBane, the coalition's national co-ordinator.

"They should be using and supporting and strengthening the public system and not contracting out."

Calian Technology Ltd. yesterday announced it had won a \$400-million, five-year contract to provide and manage health care professionals for DND. The company will hire doctors, nurses, dentists, physiotherapists and psychologists to treat personnel at 36 bases.

In a press release, the company said that while "margins on this contract are expected to be lower than traditional Business and Technology Services Division levels," the contract would still "have a significant long-term impact" on revenue.

There is nothing to stop DND from hiring doctors through a private company as the Canada Health Act does not apply to the Canadian Forces, which operates its own health system independent of provincial programs and even issues its own health cards.

The military has traditionally treated soldiers using its own doctors, but DND says it had to start using health care contractors when it ran into trouble recruiting and retraining enlisted physicians and other professionals in the late '90s.

The shortages were exacerbated when military health care professionals were sent on peacekeeping missions around the world.

"We needed somebody to maintain continuity service at home when our uniformed care providers were deployed," said Col. Jean Grondin, deputy chief of staff for health service delivery.

He declined to comment on whether the use of private contractors is another form of privatization of public health care.

"We had to fill service gaps. With the number of our uniformed clinical staff decreasing, we needed somebody to keep the home fires burning."

But Mr. McBane questioned why Calian, a company better known for systems engineering and business technology, would be given responsibility for something as important as the health of Canadian soldiers.

Calian's chief financial officer, Jacqueline Gauthier, said the company has a strong record in staffing, whatever the skills required.

"Our experience is in recruiting knowledge-type people. That's what these doctors and nurses are," she said.

Calian is the second private company to manage health care for DND. The first three-year contract was awarded to Med-Emerg International in 2001.

With that contract about to expire, the government called for competitive bids and Calian won over Med-Emerg and at least one other bidder.

The Defence Department has about 2,500 uniformed and civilian employees providing health care services, including about 150 uniformed doctors.

Calian said it plans to hire as many of the 650 to 700 contractor medical staff employed by Med-Emerg as possible.

It also hopes to provide more services to the department if the number of enlisted members expands as expected.

Their assignments with the department depend on particular needs. Some work full-time while others work on a temporary and part-time basis.