

# MONTREAL

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## Group offers health plan alternative

### Designed to protect public services

Doctors, lawyers and academics draft blueprint for limited private-care system

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GAZETTE HEALTH REPORTER

A group of prominent Quebec physicians, lawyers and academics unveiled a seven-point plan yesterday to strengthen the province's public health system while restricting private-for-profit clinics.

"The Quebec government can keep its public health-care system intact if it so chooses. It's a political choice," said Marie-Claude Prémont, associate dean of graduate studies at McGill University's law school.

The group's proposals are in response to last June's ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada, which struck down Quebec's prohibition on comprehensive private medical insurance.

The provincial government will announce measures next month to comply with the ruling.

Simon Turcotte, a medical resident in training for general surgery at the U de M, urged the government to take more steps to reduce waits for diagnostic and other medical services.

He said the Supreme Court overturned the ban on private medical insurance, in part because of lengthy waiting lists in the public system.

Among the details of the group's plan:

**Reinstate diagnostic tests** in private clinics under medicare. At present, a private radiology clinic can charge patients for an MRI scan.

**Increase spending** on health care gradually.

**Raise the salary caps** of doctors to encourage them to stay in the public system.

**Maintain the existing government regulation** that doctors must work either exclusively in the public system or opt out and practise solely in the private sector.

**Cap the fees** that private doctors can charge at the same level as those of doctors in the public system. Such a measure would discourage doctors from opting out of the Régie de l'assurance-maladie du Québec.

Make sure that equipment in public institutions is reserved for exclusive use by doctors in the public system. At present, some hospitals let doctors use operating rooms for some private-for-profit procedures like cosmetic surgery not covered under medicare.

The government must report to the public on a regular basis the latest statistics on waiting lists.

The working group on the Quebec health-care system has 30 members.

Among them are Abby Lippman of the department of biostatistics at McGill University, Daniel Proulx of the faculty of law at Université de Sherbrooke and Paul Lévesque, an emergency room physician at Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital.

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One reported measure would allow doctors who work in the public sector to also practice in private and charge patients for medical services normally covered under medicare.

They could only do so once they reached their quota in the public system.

Quebec Health Minister Philippe Couillard has neither confirmed nor denied such a proposal, fuelling speculation the government will allow the private sector a greater role in the delivery of health care.

Guy Rocher, of the Centre de recherche en droit public at the Université de Montréal and a member of the group, accused the provincial government of manipulating the Supreme Court ruling to push a pro-privatization agenda.

Rocher pointed out the ruling upholds the principles of medicare, including universality and accessibility.

Yet, he added, the Charest government appears to be moving beyond what was asked of it by the Supreme Court.

"Mr. Charest and Mr. Couillard are using the Supreme Court ruling in political way," Rocher said.

"We denounce this."