

Health Council good step forward

EDITORIAL

It's not quite what the doctor ordered, but the new Canada Health Council may yet be an invigorating tonic for our cherished medicare system.

Federal Health Minister Anne McLellan officially announced the creation of the long-awaited national council this week, more than a year after Roy Romanow's report on the future of health care called for such a watchdog. Provincial and territorial leaders had agreed in February to create the body but then let deadline after deadline slide needlessly away.

The council, which holds its first meeting next month, will monitor the publicly funded medicare system and report to Canadians annually. It should be a valuable tool that gives citizens the accountability and openness they deserve in tracking who does what with their health dollars.

The Health Council is not perfect, nor is it meant to be a cure-all.

With 26 members, it's too big to work efficiently. It consists of a chair, 12 government representatives and 13 non-government representatives.

This unwieldy gathering is not the truly independent organization Romanow envisioned, one that operates at arm's-length from government. Making matters worse, six of the jurisdictions — Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut — appointed their current deputy ministers of health to the council. How can they act as impartial advocates?

In the words of chair Michael Decter, himself a former Ontario deputy health minister, the council has to serve as a "trusted source of policy advice outside the field of intergovernmental conflict."

The council should represent every province and territory. Instead, it has no members from Quebec, which long ago established its own council but promises to share its data with the national body.

Also lacking is a government representative from Alberta, whose premier, Ralph Klein, has unfairly defied the idea of a national council from the start. He gripes about the cost and says Ottawa is intruding on a provincial jurisdiction. Privately, though, there are hints Alberta will co-operate with Decter. Even without the province's participation, the council will benefit everyone in Canada, no matter where they live.

Under former premier Ernie Eves, Ontario also dragged its heels. But since Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government took office, the province has shown commendable leadership, embracing the national council and pledging to set up its own quality-monitoring agency.

Such leadership is vital because Canadians consistently cite health care as their number-one concern. Safeguarding it as best we can must be a priority that every government recognizes. Regular reporting on the performance of the system is long overdue. Councillors can identify the best practices and help bring about constructive change across the country.

The federal government showed a dismaying lack of leadership in bringing the Health Council to life. Too much time has been squandered. Perhaps if the council fulfills its promise and becomes an effective agent for improving medicare in Canada, the wait will have been worth it.