

Toronto Star  
February 28, 2003

# Medical fund misuse feared

*Money needed for new equipment, group warns*  
*Concerns over lack of accountability for provinces*

By VALERIE LAWTON, OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The federal government's latest medical equipment fund comes with so few strings attached that provinces could once again spend the money on lawnmowers and sewing machines, warns a member of a national advisory group.

Normand Laberge, chief executive officer of the Canadian Association of Radiologists, said the \$1.5 billion committed in the recent federal budget is desperately needed to help replace aging machines and reduce waiting lists.

But he wishes Ottawa had done more in a new national health accord to ensure provincial governments don't spend the money on other things, as they did with a similar equipment fund provided in 2000.

"We ended up with a pressure cooker, delivery trucks and lawnmowers instead of CTs and MRIs, which was a real disaster," Laberge said in an interview.

"We thought finally government have listened and learned the lesson but what we're finding out in the design of the health accord ... there's no real accountability."

Laberge said he and some other members of health groups advising the federal government on provincial accountability were dismayed to learn at a recent meeting that provinces would be able to spend the money, then report later on how health services were improved.

"That's after the fact and not before," said Laberge. "The problem is that if three years from now, after all that money has been spent, we find out the services have not improved, what are we going to do? The money is lost."

Laberge has spent the last few years working like a private investigator, digging up manufacturers' sales slips and hospital reports and even going to court to find out what happened to the 2000 equipment fund.

His group, along with the Canadian Medical Association, even hired an economist to look into how the money was used.

Some of the federal cash purchased non-medical equipment such as icemakers and floor scrubbers. Laberge also discovered that some provinces announced they were buying certain diagnostic equipment but never actually did.

In Ontario, millions of federal dollars were given to a private sector company that subsequently closed or threatened to close several medical imaging clinics in the province.

The federal government has stipulated that the new money can only be used to improve access to publicly funded diagnostic services. Laberge worries the province could still give money to clinics providing both publicly and privately paid-for services.

Mike McBane of the Canadian Health Coalition shares his concern: "Public funds are being used to pay for the privatization of our system. We don't want that."

A spokesperson for federal Health Minister Anne McLellan said new reporting requirements will ensure provinces are more accountable.