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Canadian Health Coalition Coalition canadienne de la santé

2841 Riverside Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1V 8X7 CANADA

MEDIA RELEASE

Public solutions to wait times; not empty promises and “care guarantees”

OTTAWA - Canadians need the facts about wait times and solutions in the public system. Instead, we are offered “care guarantees” from Stephen Harper and Paul Martin with no commitment to preserve and expand Canada’s public health care system.

The Canadian Health Coalition (CHC) today expressed deep concern at the possible election of “any party that would manufacture a crisis in the crown jewel of Canadian social programs.”, said Kathleen Connors, national chairperson of the CHC. “We believe every dollar of public funding must go for care, and not one penny should be going to profit.”

The Canadian Health Coalition calls for:

- * Better management and coordination of wait lists, and investment in health human resources and capital infrastructure. These approaches require long-term funding and planning;
- * Public solutions to strengthen public health care. The wait-times issue must not be used to undermine public health care by legitimizing and widening the scope of privatization;
- * Primary care reform, as well as the expansion and preservation of universal health care, including home care and pharmacare; and
- * Citizens to speak out, be vigilant and act in defence of public health care, holding governments accountable on the day after the federal election and beyond.

The Canadian Health Coalition is a not-for-profit non-partisan organization dedicated to protecting and expanding Canada’s public health system for the benefit of all Canadians.

This event has been co-sponsored by Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Congress of Union Retirees of Canada, Council of Canadians, Medical Reform Group, National Anti-Poverty Organization, Seniors on Guard for Medicare.

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Overview of the National Roundtable

Wait Times: The Facts, the Politics and the Solutions

The CHC national round-table brought together representatives from every province across the country. Leaders of community-based organizations heard expert presentations from individuals with first-hand experience of the politics and the solutions to the waiting times issue.

Shirley Douglas said it was important to put the wait-times issue into a larger context. “When you have something that the country loves, you have to convince people it is broken before you can take it away.” Canada’s health care system is an excellent system by all international standards. The wait-times problems Canada faces are the same problems faced in other countries and should not be used to justify profit-making.

Dr. Brian Postl, Federal Advisor on Wait Times, gave an overview of his work on benchmarks for waiting times, as well as a series of recommendations on long-term system transformation that includes the use of information technologies, new management strategies and public education. As Normand Laberge, Co-Chair Wait Times Alliance, said, “No one in their right mind would pay for a diagnostic test if they could get it in a timely way in the public system.”

As Tim Sale, Manitoba Minister of Health described it, “there are three Ps that never quit: “Power, Privilege and Profit. We need to say no to this siren song, and say yes to “Productivity, Prevention and Primary care”.

Dr. Marie-Claude Premont, McGill University, reminded participants that the Chaoulli decision does not open the door wide to private health insurance. In fact, the majority judges decided that there must be regulations governing health care. In Quebec, doctors must choose whether to work in the public or the private system but not both. The decision only applies to 1% of physicians in Quebec, or 95 of 15,000. The Supreme Court decision gives them the right to sell insurance privately. It does not give the provincial government the right to threaten the whole system. “This fight is undoubtedly a fight about democracy, a fight that will take place within Quebec, so let’s fight it together.”

According to Gabrielle Pelletier from the Coalition Solidarite Sante Quebec. “We worry that the Chaoulli decision will be the pretext for privatization in the public system. It might start slowly, but we have to make the population realize that everyone will lose more than they will gain in that system. It is a question of equality, and it is a social question, because we have decided in Quebec that everyone has a right to healthcare. If the government decides it will change that because of the Supreme Court decision, it will have to open this up for public debate.”

One participant said that she worries the narrow focus on wait times for only five procedures will rob resources from other parts of primary care and public health programs. “Where is Stephen Harper’s wait-time guarantee for clean water in first nations communities across this country”, she asked.

Michael Rachlis, MD, an expert on public solutions to wait lists, argued that the problem is not one of capacity. Rachlis argued we need better management of the health care system. “Medicare advocates have to the advocates of quality. We can’t win the debate for public finance and delivery without very clear arguments. The best argument against private health care is that we don’t need it. Tommy Douglas fought a more difficult battle than the one we face now and I think we can win ours!”

According to economist, Armine Yalnizyan “wait time guarantees do not address the major issues: shortages in capital, labour and technology. There is no attention to management of the system as a whole. For them, it’s simply about time. That’s Pizza Pizza policy if you ask me- 30 minutes or it’s free. That’s not the way to manage a system in this country, to make sure that people stay healthy, or to make sure the system keeps getting better.