

Don't rush wait times guarantee

Juliet O'Neill, CanWest News Service

OTTAWA -- The country's top expert on wait times is warning the minority Conservative government's promised patient wait times guarantee will fail if it is rushed into place before the health care system is better prepared.

Dr. Brian Postl also warned in an interview of a potential "enormous acceleration" of public costs embedded in one aspect of the promise, in which patients who don't receive medical care in a timely manner in Canada would be covered for treatment in the United States.

Postl, head of the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, recently handed in his final report as federal adviser on wait times to Health Minister Tony Clement, who expressed impatience last month about what he termed inexplicable "reticence" by some provinces about the guarantee.

By contrast, Postl said he found all jurisdictions working diligently on reducing wait times and reported substantial progress had been made since 2004 when the previous federal government allotted \$5.5 billion for wait times reduction out of \$41 billion in extra health care funds over 10 years.

"I didn't experience any foot dragging," he said.

However, Postl said a number of building blocks need to be established before governments attempt to implement "sustainable" guarantees, or they will fail.

They included: Experience in setting and using minimum wait time benchmarks for different treatments; creating waiting lists beyond a single doctor or surgeon; and creating regional health care alliances in the West, Atlantic Canada, Quebec and Ontario to develop maximum health care capacity and practice out-of-province treatment.

"The concern is that if you move too fast into the area of guarantees before you can actually deliver them, you end up doing more to undermine public confidence instead of improving public confidence," Postl said. "So I think at the point that guarantees arrive we have to be sure that we deliver them and deliver them consistently in the long term."

He said "it is conceivable" a limited number of guarantees are possible within a year in some of the five key areas identified by the health ministers for benchmarks: hip and knee replacements, cancer radiation, coronary bypass grafts, cataract surgery, and some diagnostic services.

But he warned of "taking on more in the short term than we can reasonably support in the long term."

Postl warned of the potential costs of U.S. medical treatment, and not solely because of travel.

"Certainly if we were to use any part of the American system to meet Canadian needs, the cost of service in the United States is substantially higher than that of Canada, both physician and hospital-based services," he said. "I think the acceleration in costs, using the American system, would be enormous."