

Toronto Star (December 11, 2002)

As if Romanow never happened

By CAROL GOAR

It may take a shareholder revolt to get the message through.

Two weeks after Roy Romanow gave voice to the people's hopes for medicare, the provincial premiers are back to business as usual: demanding more federal money to plug holes in the existing system.

The federal Liberals are nodding encouragingly.

And the bureaucrats are blithely telling Canadians not to expect action soon. After all, Christmas is coming and there are jurisdictional issues to sort through and nothing happens quickly in the realm of intergovernmental relations.

The managers seem to have forgotten who owns medicare.

Romanow never did. "Canadians are the shareholders of the health-care system," he wrote. "They own it and are the sole reason the health-care system exists. Yet despite this Canadians are often left out in the cold."

That is why the health-care commissioner recommended that a new principle - accountability - be added to the Canada Health Act.

That is why he called for a new Canada Health Transfer to replace Ottawa's all-purpose provincial grants.

And that is why he proposed the creation of a new federal-provincial "Health Council of Canada" which would set national standards and tell Canadians whether they are being met.

"Canadians no longer accept being told that things are - or will get - better," Romanow wrote. "They want to see proof."

This doesn't suit the nation's health ministers. They emerged from their first Federal-provincial discussion of the Romanow Report, last week, dismissing or downplaying most of the commissioner's suggestions.

"I didn't hear one person advocate in favour of a national health council," said Alberta Health Minister Gary Mar.

"I think we should forget about this national program of health for Canada," said Quebec Health Minister François Legault. "It's against the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories."

"Roy Romanow was just another chapter in the long saga of health-care reports," said Ontario Health Minister Tony Clement.

Playing the role at which she excels - dealmaker - federal Health Minister Anne McLellan said she was "heartened" by the meeting. She said Ottawa was prepared to be flexible in meeting the provinces' demands.

It was as if Romanow's 18-month dialogue with Canadians - in which 38,000 people took part - had never happened.

It was as if his blueprint to modernize the health-care system were an inconvenience to be brushed aside or negotiated away.

Events are unfolding exactly as Canadians feared they would. Romanow has delivered a report that reflects their values and priorities and now the nation's political leaders are balking, haggling and ignoring the people's message.

This calls for a strong dose of shareholder activism.

The lobbying blitz by public health-care advocates that took place on Parliament Hill yesterday was a useful beginning. And the two-day health-care conference - "Moving from Debate to Action" - that begins in Gatineau, Quebec today may put Romanow's recommendations back in the spotlight.

But these events feature the usual cast of characters: doctors, nurses, politicians, academics, pharmaceutical makers, insurance providers and various medical charities.

What is really needed is an effort by individual Canadians to put some political muscle behind the Romanow report.

-- Later this week, MPs and MPPs head home to their ridings for the Christmas break. They need to hear from their constituents that it would be a costly mistake to treat the Romanow inquiry as a mere feel-good exercise.

Canadians meant it when they said they don't like the way their \$73-billion-a-year public health system is being managed. And they have the power to fire the managers.

-- Between now and the end of January, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and the premiers will be laying the groundwork for a new health-care deal. They need to hear from the thousands of Canadians who participated in the Romanow inquiry.

Citizens responded, in good faith, to the government's invitation to help "strengthen and renew" their health-care system. In return, they expect their political leaders to take their advice seriously. They'll remember those who don't.

-- Between now and spring, Premier Ernie Eves will be preparing for a provincial election. He needs to hear from Ontarians who want to see the Romanow report translated into public policy.

Voters made it clear to the commission that they want a government that is accountable for the way their health-care dollars are spent. If the Tories can't deliver, there are other parties that can.

For almost a decade, Canadians have watched in helpless frustration as their once-proud health-care system has fallen victim to deficit-cutting, federal-provincial bickering and short-sighted restructuring.

When they told pollsters they were worried, they were ignored. When they told their elected representatives that that fixing medicare was their top priority, they were handed Band-Aids.

Finally, this fall, Romanow offered them the tools to hold the nation's health-care managers to account.

But Canadians won't win them without a fight.

They'll have to behave like the kind of shareholders who make corporate executives nervous.