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Harper's Cuts to Refugee Health Care: *A violation of medical ethics and a disgrace to Canada*

OTTAWA – The Canadian Health Coalition (CHC) denounced the cuts recently announced to refugee health services by Minister Jason Kenney because they put vulnerable people at risk.

As of June 30th refugees in Canada will be cut off access to treatment for chronic diseases including hypertension, angina, diabetes, high cholesterol, and lung disease. No other Canadians are denied these treatments.

“The changes are being justified using three flawed arguments. First, we are told that refugees are abusing our health care system. The reality is the exact opposite. Our challenge as physicians is to engage vulnerable people with the health care system, especially prevention and primary care, not turn them away. I have never met a refugee who came to Canada because they wanted better health care. In comparison to starvation, torture, and rape, getting vision care is never the motivation. Second, they say they are doing this for public safety. Actually, they are endangering public safety by denying basic health care services. People only pose a risk to the public if they are not properly engaged in health care. For example, if a person with tuberculosis is only offered care after they are spitting blood, they will have already infected others. Third, the Minister claims this is about saving taxpayers money. When you stop providing preventive care you wind up with repeated emergency room visits and preventable hospitalizations that cost a lot more money,” said Dr. Mark Tyndall, Head of Infectious Diseases at the Ottawa Hospital and Professor of Medicine at the University of Ottawa.

“This new refugee health care policy violates my ethical obligations as a physician. It is unethical and a disgrace to Canadian society. The Minister’s claim that this ‘ensures fairness, and protects public health and safety’ is Orwellian,” said Dr. Tyndall.

The Canadian Health Coalition sees the cuts to refugee health care services as part of a broader pattern emerging from the recent federal budget. Other cuts that affect the health of vulnerable Canadians include: mental health services for soldiers at Petawawa; systematic spending cuts to aboriginal health programs; the elimination of Health Canada’s Bureau of Food Safety Assessment and food safety inspection at the CFIA.

“The dismantling of one of the oldest parts of Canada’s public healthcare system –health care for displaced persons who arrived in Canada following W.W. II – is symptomatic of the Harper government’s approach to health care. ‘Cut and run’ is their motto and changing the hearts of Canadians from compassion to contempt is their goal,” said Michael McBane, Executive Director of the CHC.

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