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Medicare advocates criticize wait-time pledges

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OTTAWA -- While the notion of health-care guarantees -- such as promising to treat patients promptly close to home, or to pay for them to be treated in another jurisdiction -- may seem attractive on the surface, it undermines medicare, an Ottawa conference was told yesterday.

"The care guarantee has become the Trojan horse for for-profit health care," said Kathleen Connors, chairwoman of the Canadian Health Coalition, a non-profit group that promotes medicare.

In their bid to meet care guarantees, provinces will open the door to more privately delivered care, she said.

"That parallel private system will provide faster care, but only for those who can afford it," Ms. Connors said.

During the federal election campaign, both the Conservatives and the Liberals have made care guarantees central to their health platforms.

Both have promised to adopt benchmarks for the treatment of specific conditions and provide funding for patients to travel to other jurisdictions for treatment if they are not treated within a predetermined time frame.

The major distinction between the two is that Liberal Party Leader Paul Martin stressed that federal money could be spent only in Canadian public institutions.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper set no such conditions, implying care could be provided in for-profit clinics in Canada, or even in the United States and Europe. Because of that stand, Mr. Harper was assailed by some speakers.

Shirley Douglas, the daughter of medicare founder Tommy Douglas who has actively campaigned for the New Democratic Party in the election, was the most blunt, saying the care guarantees made by the Conservatives are the thin edge of the wedge.

Mr. Harper, she said, "is a man who, in power, will use that power to see to it that our health system is on its way to ceasing to exist."

Ms. Douglas reminded the audience that Mr. Harper was previously the leader of the National Citizens Coalition, a group that was "founded with the express purpose of preventing publicly funded health care."

Yesterday's one-day conference had a theme of "Wait times: the facts, the politics and the solutions."