



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Doctors to argue for private health system

B.C. surgeon creating organization to battle 'propaganda' against change

By GLORIA GALLOWAY

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OTTAWA -- An orthopedic surgeon in British Columbia who opened his own hospital nine years ago is creating an organization to battle what he calls the decades of "propaganda" that suggests an exclusively public system is the best way to provide health care.

The Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association will begin developing its blueprint for health-care reform at a conference scheduled for November that is already attracting some well-known medical-policy experts, Brian Day, the group's president, said.

"The reason for forming the association," Dr. Day said, "was to generate a voice to put forward an alternative to the many organizations across the country that, over the last 30 to 40 years, have been propagating the myth, in our opinion, that a single, state-run system is the best option for Canadians."

It is also aimed at providing more access to private care after a recent Supreme Court ruling that it is wrong to deny patients in Quebec insurance to cover privately performed procedures that the public system finances, he said.

Because the group is so new it is difficult to say how many of the tens of thousands of private clinics in Canada will opt to become members.

The November conference will bring together health experts from countries like New Zealand and those in Europe that blend private with public health care. The list of speakers includes former Reform Party leader Preston Manning, Senator Michael Kirby and British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell.

Dr. Day conceded that most of the confirmed attendees are on record as supporting some blend of private and public care.

But "we don't want to debate," Dr. Day said. "We want legal scholars to establish what the law means and then we want a group of individuals to advise us and suggest how we should move forward based on what the law is in Canada."

Canadian politicians of all stripes are afraid to voice approval of private care even though the World Health Organization ranks Canada about 30th in terms of efficiency and third in terms of cost, he said.

"One of the strategies that you will see used over and over again [by supporters of the public system] is, 'We don't want an American-style health care,' " Dr. Day said.

"And what our organization is putting forward is not that. It's a European type of health system where poor people do not wait in line for heart surgery and hip replacement."

But the doctor, who said he built his hospital after growing frustrated with the limited access to operating rooms in public institutions, will have difficulty persuading those who oppose private care that even small amounts of it should be permitted.

"The private health care agenda is money-driven -- I mean, we're talking big bucks here - - and ideologically driven," said Dora Jeffries, co-chair of the Ontario Health Coalition. "There is absolutely no evidence that private health care is better, that it's cheaper, that it's more efficient. The most efficient best way to deliver the best health care to the most people is the way we do it in Canada."

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