



LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN; CLINICS GROUP AIMS AT HEALTH MONOPOLY

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Since the Supreme Court's landmark judgment opened the door to private medical insurance, experts have been wrestling with the implications.

In a bid to spur reform, a new organization has invited politicians and experts in law, health, insurance, economics and medicine to a national conference in Vancouver.

The goal is to develop a practical blueprint for change and recommend action that conforms to the guidelines of the court decision.

The conference is being hosted by the newly established Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association (CIMCA). Interim president Dr. Brian Day is CEO of Vancouver's Cambie Surgery Centre, largest private medical facility in Canada.

"The mission is very simple. It's to increase health-care access for Canadians," says Day. "And it just so happens that this group believes that the way that can be achieved is by eliminating a public monopoly."

Despite its name, CIMCA is not only welcoming medical clinics as members (about eight B.C. clinics have joined so far and clinics in Alberta and Ontario have expressed interest).

Patients and ordinary Canadians are also welcome to jump on the bandwagon, says Day. "We intend this to be the biggest health-care association in Canada."

Ruling in a Quebec case, the Supreme Court struck down the ban on private insurance for services covered by medicare.

"The biggest question is what is the relevance of this ruling outside of Quebec," says Day. "If I were the minister of health in any province, I would be terrified that I would be taken to court."

Another court challenge could put the government in the uncomfortable situation of having to defend a system with long wait lists, says Day.

And that would be politically disastrous in light of the Supreme Court's incisive comment that getting on a waiting list is not access to health care, he notes.

"What we want this conference to do is establish what the rules mean, then move on," he says.

Part of the difficulty is that reforming medicare is such an explosive issue that we hardly know where to start.

The Alberta government is slowly pushing the envelope with its so-called Third Way.

In July, the province unveiled a plan to allow patients to pay for fancier hospital rooms and enhanced medical services. But this does nothing to address the fundamental problem -- timely access to basic medical care.

Where is the public clamour for luxury hospital suites and optional upgraded medical treatment?

This province recently took a leap into the unknown with its plan to allow Albertans to buy private insurance for non-emergency health care.

The government was short on specifics, of course, because there's no template to work from. We're flying by the seat of our pants on this one.

But if Quebecers' rights are being violated by long waits for care in the public system, as the Supreme Court determined, surely the rights of other Canadians are being breached as well.

The trouble is, the high court was split on whether those outside Quebec have a right to private care when there are unacceptable delays in the public system.

If there was a court challenge on the issue in another province, the Supreme Court would likely rule the same way, says constitutional lawyer Peter Hogg, who will attend the CIMCA conference in November.

Alberta may very well trigger the next court battle over the future of medicare.