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The myth of medicare?

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When it comes to medicare, are we clinging to a myth?

Universal health care is a vital part of Canada's national image. The egalitarian concept - a one-tier system for all - is lauded by politicians, cherished by citizens and perennially cited as grounds for our alleged cultural superiority.

But has the lofty promise of medicare flatlined? And, over the past two decades, has a two-tier system quietly emerged while few were paying official attention?

These are the provocative questions posed by Medicare Schmedicare (CBC's Passionate Eye, 9 tonight), a powerful, brilliant, timely documentary from filmmaker Robert Duncan.

Interviewing doctors, patients and experts, Duncan travels across the country, taking a scalpel to conventional wisdom, exposing the hypocrisies of a system that, by many sobering accounts, appears to be choking in a state of terminal decay.

Few would dispute the virtuous ideals of the 1984 Canada Health Act. But, according to several experts, the chasm between principle and practice grows wider each year.

As Duncan notes "The flaw is that the poor are stuck in never-ending wait lists and the rich haven't bothered with medicare for years."

At a time when more than 3 million Canadians can't get an appointment with a family doctor, those with money are opting out of the burdened public system.

Medcan, a private clinic in Toronto, now treats up to 8,000 patients a year. These people pay \$1,250 for a comprehensive check-up and an exhaustive battery of tests, including many that would be prohibited under medicare unless the patient reported specific symptoms.

Medcan's Dr. Bob Francis says the public system is predicated upon a volume model. That is, if doctors get an average of \$15 to \$20 per appointment, they need to treat many patients to run a viable practice.

"You can't practise, in my view, good medicine in a preventative way seeing a patient every five minutes," says Francis.

It's not just in Toronto.

In Vancouver, more than 3,000 procedures are performed each year at one private surgical centre alone. In Montreal, upwards of 150 citizens now pay between \$60 and \$650 per day for ultrasounds and MRIs, tests that usually require months of waiting.

"Here's the absurdity," says Duncan. "In Canada, you can legally spend your own money on something as frivolous as bigger breasts or tighter buttocks, but it's currently against the law to pay privately for replacement of your sore knee."

Michael McBane, with the Canadian Health Coalition, delivers the counterpoints.

"Physicians are not insurance salesmen or lawyers," he says. "There is a social contract with physicians ... they're not just free to open up a private business and do whatever the market will dictate."

But, as we see tonight, that's precisely what many are doing. And politicians, for the most part, are turning a blind eye, content to shroud medicare with redolent platitudes that seem surgically detached from reality.

"In fact, even the politicians must know that time is running out on universal health care," Duncan says. "And that for years we have been living a lie. We have been swallowing the medicare myth, saluting an emperor who has no clothes."

As others point out, Canadians already pay or need private insurance to cover dental services, eyeglasses and prescription medicines. So what's the problem, they ask, with introducing more choice into the system?

One Canadian facilitator, referring to patients who seek private care in Canada or the United States, puts it this way "They're not jumping the queue. They're leaving the queue. And they are creating a spot for someone else who may not have the resources to pay for their care."

Dr. Brian Day is also unapologetic about the private clinic he runs in Vancouver.

"We have always taken the position that if a patient is in pain or disabled, that we will take them in and treat them," he says. "And it is the government that is acting unlawfully in trying to prevent that rather than us acting unlawfully in flaunting the Canada Health Act."

You decide.

But this much is clear Medicare Schmedicare isn't only tonight's must-see program, it should be mandatory viewing for anyone who cares about this country's ailing health system.