



LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN

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

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

The goal is to develop a practical blueprint for change and recommend action that conforms to the guidelines of the Supreme Court's June decision.

The conference is being hosted by the newly established Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association (CIMCA). Its interim president is Dr. Brian Day, CEO of Vancouver's Cambie Surgery Centre, the 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."

In the event of another court challenge, the government would be put in the uncomfortable situation of having to defend the current system with its 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 to establish what the rules mean and 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 of health-care delivery.

Earlier this month, the province unveiled a plan that would 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?

Yesterday the province 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 Canadians outside Quebec have a right to private health 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 is scheduled to attend the CIMCA conference.

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