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Forum promotes private health care: Speakers claim private clinics would help repair system, but protesters, nurses disagree

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VANCOUVER | Opening the delivery of health care to private clinics would benefit the public health system, according to speakers at a two-day forum in Vancouver.

A succession of health care professionals and lawyers, as well as a handful of politicians, told delegates the current health care system cannot be repaired without the injection of market competition.

"Despite putting more money into the health system, waiting periods have increased over a 10-year period by 90 per cent," said Dr. Brian Day, who operates a private clinic in Vancouver and is president of the Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association, which sponsored the conference.

He said a study by the World Health Organization of health care in developed nations ranked Canada 30th in terms of efficiency, but third in terms of costs.

Day said two million Canadians are currently waiting for medical treatment, and some will have to wait several years. He said a recent study of B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver found 50 per cent of children were waiting for treatment for "a medically unacceptable period of time."

"What we're trying to do is build a better public system," he said. "It's shown from other countries that if you have a public system with a complementary private system, the public system is better.

"A monopoly is not good for the consumer in any field."

Former Opposition leader and Reform party founder Preston Manning blamed Canada's public monopoly on health care delivery for its poor performance.

"The option is either the current system with its waiting lines and problems, or a mixed system of public and private delivery," he said.

"There are 24 other countries that have got better health care results than us for seniors -- shorter waiting lines, more doctors, better cure rates on some of the major diseases from infant mortality to breast cancer, and the distinguishing characteristic is not that they spend more money, but that they have this mixed approach."

As the conference began in the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver about 150 people, many of them seniors, gathered briefly on the sidewalk to denounce attempts to reform the system by allowing private participation.

"We want medicare publicly funded and available to everybody" said Rudy Lawrence, president of the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of B.C. "We're upset with the agenda because

the agenda is to discuss how to fix medicare [with a two-tier system] and we really question why the insurance industry has to tell us how to do that.

"It has a lot of problems, any system does, but nothing that some good management and some more funding wouldn't help."

Debra McPherson, president of the B.C. Nurses Union, attended the conference as a delegate, but complained that the speakers were all in favour of private involvement in health care delivery. She believes the current system can be repaired.

"We are aware of the shortages of personnel and that there are waiting times and gaps in the system," she said. "Those are things that we have been trying to work constructively in the public system to change and improve."

But Senator Michael Kirby (Lib-South Shore, N.S.), who issued a major report on reform in the health care system in 2002, said the current system cannot be repaired in that fashion.

"The way to reform the health care system is to keep it as a single-payer publicly funded system, but to introduce a significant element of competition in the delivery of services, including allowing private-sector companies to deliver some of the services if they can compete," he said.