



Medicare advocates fear B.C. appears headed down privatization road

Canadian Press Newswire

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

Section: National General News

Byline: BY CAMILLE BAINS

Source:

VANCOUVER (CP) _ British Columbia's plans to reform health care raised eyebrows with medicare advocates Wednesday as concerns mounted about the province joining Alberta and Quebec on the road to privatization and the erosion of the existing public system.

B.C.'s intention to include a further role for the private sector in health-care delivery was announced Tuesday in the government's throne speech, which promised a "conversation" with voters on reforms before the next provincial election in 2009.

The government also wants to add the principle of sustainability to the Canada Health Act.

Stuart Murray, a researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said that while discussion is a good idea he's concerned that some of the questions posed in the throne speech assume from the outset that the private sector is the way to go.

Among the questions: "Why are we so afraid to look at mixed health-care delivery models," when they work in Europe?

"My concern is that we're going into this with a preconceived notion of what is a good idea," Murray said.

More privatization would only end up poaching a limited number of doctors and nurses from the public system, he said.

Michael McBane, national spokesman for the Canadian Health Coalition, said there's no need for any more conversation on health care reform.

"We just finished the largest consultation on health care in the western world, which was the Romanow Commission, which spent millions of dollars and came up with a clear plan and then the government sat on it because of industry lobbying," McBane said.

While B.C. is getting thumbs down from proponents of public health care, independent medical clinics across Canada are applauding the move as a potential breakthrough in health care reform.

Dr. Brian Day, who co-owns the private Cambie Surgery Centre in Vancouver, called the B.C. government's throne speech a "breakthrough" in health care reform.

Day, head of the Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association, said the questions contained in the speech are a good starting point "to stare down the myths of the medicare monopoly and embrace competition and patient choice."

Toronto-based health policy analyst Dr. Michael Rachlis said the B.C. and Alberta governments have already proved that a well managed public health-care system can dramatically improve access for hip and knee replacements through specialized surgical clinics, for example.

In Alberta, the wait time for orthopedic surgery dropped to 11 weeks from 90 weeks, Rachlis said.

A clinic to replace hips and knees in B.C. has been so successful that the province recently announced it's expanding it to a second location.

McBane, meanwhile, agreed with B.C. NDP Leader Carole James that sustainability is a code word for privatization.

"It's also a big lie because private health insurance is much more expensive," McBane said from Ottawa.

"They're basically being dishonest about what their real objectives are. And instead of watering down the public health-care system and introducing private elements we should be expanding public insurance, for example, to pick up medically necessary drugs."

Aslam Anis, a health economist at the University of British Columbia, said that while there may be room to reform the system, "in general the government doesn't have a good handle on the costs of providing health care.

"So a lot of times these reforms are made and alternatives are implemented without really knowing what the original cost was."

Anis said there's nothing wrong with private health care unless it cuts quality and allows for a two-tier system that puts those who can afford hefty costs ahead of those who can't.

"I think medicare is great," he said, echoing McBane's concerns that it should be expanded to include drugs because people who can't afford medication end up back in hospital and costing the system more money.

Harvey Voogd, spokesman for Friends of Medicare in Calgary, said he doesn't understand why B.C.'s Premier Campbell plans to travel to Europe to examine other health-care systems unless he's willing to pump more money into the public system.

“In most European countries the percentage of dollars spent on the public health-care system are much higher,” Voogd said. “In Sweden 85 per cent of dollars spent on health care are publicly funded,” he said, adding drugs, dentistry and vision care are part of what's covered.

“I think a lot of British Columbians might say to Premier Campbell, ‘What a smart move. Let's go in that direction.’”

Copyright © 2006 The Canadian Press