

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

Province will ask citizens to decide the fate of medicare:  
Throne speech promise comes as private-care backer takes  
BCMA reins

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VICTORIA -- British Columbia's Liberal government is launching a sweeping review of medicare, promising to let citizens decide if they want a health care system that might feature even more private clinics.

"The Canada Health Act needs to be updated," the B.C. government announced in its throne speech read Tuesday by Lt.-Gov. Iona Campagnolo.

"Not to make it weaker -- but to make it stronger and consistent with its original vision and intent -- to preserve public health care for all Canadians."

The government's announcement came the same day B.C. doctors elected private medicine pioneer Dr. Brian Day their nominee as 2007-08 president of the 60,000-member Canadian Medical Association, a powerful lobby organization.

Day, co-owner of Cambie Surgery Centre, a private hospital, said of his election: "People voted for change. The status quo is no longer acceptable. I thought I had a good chance because doctors realize it is time for a change in the way health care is delivered and accessed."

Revamping the Canada Health Act, the blueprint of medicare, has traditionally been viewed as the job of the prime minister of Canada.

But Campbell is flexing his provincial muscle by promising a three-year debate on medicare, to be completed before the next provincial election in the spring of 2009. He did not spell out how British Columbians' opinions would be canvassed, but the throne speech set out a series of questions promising a heated political debate:

## IMAGES



John McKay, Victoria Times Colonist  
Lieutenant-Governor Iona Campagnolo is greeted by Premier Gordon Campbell prior to reading Tuesday's throne speech.

- "Does it really matter to patients where or how they obtain their surgical treatment if it is paid for with public funds?"

- "Why are we so afraid to look at mixed health care delivery models, when other states in Europe and around the world have used them to produce better results at a lower cost to taxpayers?"

- "Why are we so quick to condemn any consideration of other systems as a slippery slope to an American-style system that none of us wants?"

New Democratic Party leader Carole James immediately accused the premier of having an agenda to privatize medicare.

"I think it's very clear the premier doesn't like the Canada Health Act, he wants to find a way around it, he wants to find [forms of] privatization and [how] they introduce it," said James.

The NDP, however, is caught in a bit of a flip-flop on the issue. While in power, it allowed an increase in the number of private clinics in the province to deliver publicly funded health service.

But in a new era, the new NDP leader believes cutting-edge research shows innovations within the public system, such as creating more community clinics, are more efficient answers to saving medicare, which eats up about 44 per cent of the provincial budget.

James even praised Alberta, where a Conservative government is also challenging the Canada Health Act, as a place the premier might visit to learn about such innovation.

"The premier could save himself a trip to Europe by actually going over to Alberta and looking at [Alberta's] public clinic if he wants to," said James, commenting on Campbell's plan to visit Britain, France, Norway and Sweden to study Europe's mixed approach to health care.

Other promises from the Liberal government, still yet to be fully fleshed out, include:

- A "groundbreaking new housing strategy" for the poor. While no details were offered, it is expected to give people direct subsidies to help them pay for rent rather than building more public housing.

- The premier and Education Minister Shirley Bond will visit every school district in the province to meet with teachers, students and parents to look at educational innovation. The government will also publish individual reports on every school to measure class size, the number of teachers and create a registry reporting names of teachers disciplined for "misconduct involving emotional, physical or sexual abuse."

- More funding for treatment of people addicted to crystal meth. However, there is no specific statement that there will be more facilities to house addicts during their rehabilitation.

But the government's medicare plans were the major legislative and policy announcement.

In a bid to show he isn't attacking the Canada Health Act, as the NDP charge, Campbell promised to make B.C. the first province to guarantee the traditional principles of medicare -- a universal, accessible, comprehensive, portable and publicly administered health care system for all -- into a provincial law.

But with \$1.5 trillion spent on public health care over the last four decades, and with costs still spiraling upward, Campbell says a sixth condition must also be added in the law to protect medicare for future generations: sustainability.

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#### HIGHLIGHTS:

- Kermode bear will be designated B.C.'s official animal.
- Province will enshrine the five basic principles of the Canada Health Act and add a sixth -- sustainability -- as part of health reform.
- A "provincewide conversation" will be held to protect public health care in the long term.
- An independent foundation for health innovation and renewal will be created to study other successful healthcare models in the world.