

NATIONAL POST

Suffering for Smitherman

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Can there be anyone left who doesn't see the extremist ideology of monopolistic public medicare for the superstition it is?

Consider the events of last week, when a newspaper disclosed that the private Don Mills Surgical Unit Ltd. had put forward a plan to reduce Ontario's year-long knee-replacement waiting list by performing 1,500 of the operations under contract and that the Ontario health ministry was considering the proposal. This apparently came as a total surprise to Health Minister George Smitherman, who announced the same day that, "I will never support the outsourcing of those knee surgeries to any private, for-profit-motivated organization," and huffed that, "the not-for-profit public health-care system is the best expression of Canadian values." Cheer up, patients: don't you know suffering is patriotic?

Mr. Smitherman was correct to describe the proposal as an outsourcing of knee surgeries to a for-profit organization. But surely it's at least a little awkward for him to say he would "never support" such a thing when Don Mills Surgical already receives provincial funding to perform knee arthroscopies, eye surgeries and other procedures. Why is it kosher for this private facility to perform one kind of public-funded knee procedure but not others? And what on earth does the difference have to do with "Canadian values"?

The answer, of course, is "nothing." To politicians like Mr. Smitherman, the Canadian flag is merely a convenient veil for the ugly effects of ideologically motivated health care rationing. His snap decision, made without waiting for a cost-benefit analysis from his own bureaucrats, has nothing to do with any of the traditional stated reasons for opposition to medicare outsourcing. Critics cite higher costs for private care, but Smitherman didn't say he would consider new outsourcing when the price was right; he said he would never consider it at all.

Even presuming the worst about the economics of private care -- and as things stand, we appear to be letting some of our best doctors concentrate on uninsured elective procedures, affluent American visitors and backdoor treatments funded by the military and workers' compensation -- what would be the greatest possible long-term harm posed by accepting a one-time contract proposal for a specific number of surgeries? If the ministry decided later that the contract was the wrong move, it could simply cut off the oxygen to the private clinic and enjoy the benefits of a shortened public queue for knee work. In the meantime, hundreds of otherwise immobile Canadians would be playing with their grandchildren, shooting 18 holes on the golf course and reporting to work.

The truth is that formal medicare outsourcing has already become part of the landscape in many provinces -- yes, including Ontario, where Don Mills Surgical has been a licensed part of the system for 40 years. The ambitious Mr. Smitherman, who apparently seeks to promote himself within Dalton McGuinty's cabinet as the up-and-coming champion of obsolete Trudeau-era statism, may think he can pass off his hypocrisy as "Canadian values." But we like to think that the voters of Ontario, particularly those with a twinge or two in their knees, know better.

