

We don't need demagogues

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Ontarians deserve a better, more thoughtful -- and, frankly, more honest -- person in charge of our health care system than a demagogue such as George Smitherman.

The provincial health minister has always been known for his combative style, but now he's picking unnecessary fights for partisan political gain.

Previously, Mr. Smitherman has forced private ultrasound diagnosticians out of the province, thereby denying Ontarians the right to spend their own money on tests that don't make the top of the priority lists at government facilities. He's spent public money to buy private MRI clinics on ideological grounds, to no noticeable benefit for patients. He's denied that our shortage of family physicians has anything to do with the fact they can easily make more money elsewhere in Canada. Mr. Smitherman himself has de-listed eye exams and much physiotherapy from public coverage even as he's denounced people with less radical ideas.

Now the minister has accused the president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association, chief spokesman for Canada's doctors, of wanting to destroy public medicare.

Here's what that man, Dr. Brian Day, actually advocates: Patients, using their public insurance cards, should be able to choose whether to be treated at government-owned hospitals or privately run facilities. Either way, medicare would pay for medically necessary services.

Dr. Day's idea threatens Mr. Smitherman because it means the Ontario government would lose control of provincial health spending. Currently, the government decides how much to spend; if the government wants to be cheap, sick and injured people wait. Dr. Day wants to give patients and their doctors -- not the government -- the power to decide when they need treatment.

Mr. Smitherman can't attack Dr. Day's actual position because it's so reasonable and patient-empowering. Instead, the minister makes things up and attacks those.

"(The CMA has) just elected a guy ... who believes in a system where well-off Canadians can pay to get faster treatment," Mr. Smitherman said in a speech Monday. Coinciding with his speech, Mr. Smitherman issued a news release identifying Dr. Day by name as "the latest threat to public health care in Canada."

The reason: A Liberal candidate is facing a tough byelection fight in Parkdale-High Park. Cranking up the rhetoric might help.

Mr. Smitherman refuses to distinguish between public funding of health care and public delivery of health care. Protecting a system of public funding has broad popular support, although the mechanism and extent of public funding are debatable. Protecting a system of public delivery, though, is something only big-government ideologues and health-workers' unions care much about. If the care is good, accessible and efficient, who delivers it shouldn't matter.

Even people who disagree must at least favour an honest discussion of the questions. Mr. Smitherman evidently doesn't. He squishes different problems together and pretends they're the same, rejects possible solutions out of hand, and redefines his terms at will.

If necessary, we now see, he invents. And he's decided Canada's doctors are his enemies. Because of people such as Mr. Smitherman, we can't have an open debate about health care in Canada.

In a turbulent time for health care, Mr. Smitherman has been a poor health minister. His attack on Dr. Day reaches new and unacceptable depths. If the minister won't resign, Mr. McGuinty should fire him.

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