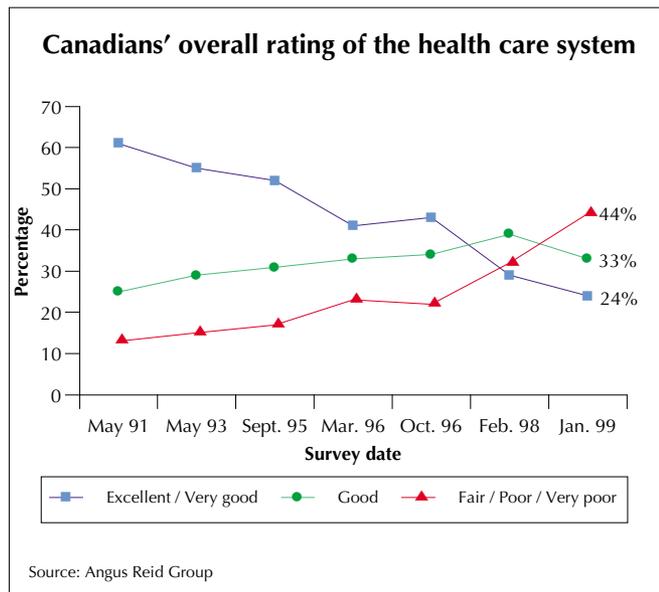




## Pulse

# Medicare's reputation in free fall before budget

Recent public opinion polls indicate that the number of Canadians who consider the health care system excellent or very good has fallen from a high of 60% in 1991 to a low of 24% in 1999. Meanwhile, the proportion of Canadians rating it fair or poor peaked this year at 44%. The results help explain Ottawa's concentration on health care in the February federal budget.



More than half of the 1999 respondents (57%) said the quality of health care had worsened in their community during the past 2 years, and most placed the blame on provincial governments (51%).

In February Canadians were also asked about the top issues Canada's leaders should address and 58% of respondents cited health care without being prompted; this response was most common in Alberta (63%). Unemployment was the second most cited issue (21%). This contrasts sharply with a year ago, when only 15% cited health care as a top issue and 35% mentioned unemployment.

Women were more likely to cite health care as an important issue (65%) than men (51%), and those over age 55 were more concerned (67%) than those aged 35 to 54 (56%).

More than three-quarters of Canadians (76%) felt that the February budget was "on the right track" and 42% believed that the money the federal government injected into the health care system will bring noticeable improvements in the quality of health care. However, more than half of respondents (54%) felt the budget will have little impact on health care.

**This column was written by Lynda Buske, Chief, Physician Resources Information Planning, CMA. Readers may send potential research topics to Patrick Sullivan (sullip@cma.ca; 613 731-8610 or 800 663-7336, x2126; fax 613 565-2382).**

## Dental journal challenges Health Canada's new mercury levels

Canada's leading dental journal says a recent Health Canada decision to lower the recommended daily exposure to mercury for women of child-bearing age and children younger than 10 "does not seem to be based on any new scientific finding of human toxicity." A study in the January issue of the *Canadian Dental Association Journal* (65:42-6) reports that the new lower limit recommended by Health Canada is 95% below the level that may cause health problems. (The article is available online, [www.cda-adc](http://www.cda-adc)

[.ca/jcda/vol-65/issue-1/42.html](http://www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-65/issue-1/42.html).)

Mercury levels are a major issue for dentists because mercury is found in dental amalgam.

Dr. Derek Jones of Dalhousie University reports that a person would have to have 490 amalgam surfaces to meet maximum exposure guidelines established by Health Canada. He also considers amalgam fillings too easy a target. Jones, a professor of biomaterials, notes that "the uptake of food-related organic mercury is 6 times higher than the uptake of mercury from amalgam.

Moreover, food-related mercury is significantly more toxic." Jones also argues that many studies of amalgam-related mercury are flawed "by confusion between exposure and absorption for the various forms of mercury, a limited selection of data, the ignoring of confounding variables or the misclassification of data."

Dental amalgam is currently the subject of a class-action lawsuit launched against the federal government and suppliers of amalgam by Canadians for Mercury Relief.