Federal government should take a bigger role in health care, leaders say

Major Canadian health organizations support provincial and territorial premiers' efforts to collaborate and save money, but some are calling for more federal involvement in improving health care.

The Council of the Federation, composed of Canada's 13 premiers, met July 24–26 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario to discuss, in part, their collaborative efforts to improve health care. They also called on the federal government to stop cutting funding and offloading responsibilities.

These responsibilities include, among other things, health coverage for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and refugee health care, and cuts to long-term care beds for veterans, says The Council of Canadians' Health Care Campaigner Adrienne Silnicki.

While these are important, there are other aspects of medicare that also require federal collaboration, say several organizations.

The Council of Canadians, a national, nonprofit, social action organization, arranged a protest of several thousand people during the premiers' meeting. Their main goal was to get the premiers to demand that Prime Minister Stephen Harper meet with them to negotiate health care in Canada.

"We are pleased that the premiers are working together," says Silnicki, however, Harper's involvement is needed to "to improve continuity of care and access to care, as well as making cost-saving efforts more effective." For example, a national pharmaceutical purchasing plan could save "tens of billions [of dollars] instead of hundreds of millions" under the premiers' current efforts.

In April, the premiers agreed to jointly purchase the six most common generic drugs, which they say will save the provinces and territories \$100 million annually. The premiers are

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Over the next year, the premiers' Health Care Innovation Working Group will focus on improving health care for the elderly and saving money by reducing the number of unnecessary diagnostic tests.

negotiating a similar deal for 27 other drugs, which will save an additional \$60–\$70 million per year.

The Canadian Nurses Association also sees the need for a widely agreed upon role for the federal government. In addition to uniting the health care systems so they provide consistent access and quality, President Barb Mildon says the federal government should be watching what the provinces do with the federal health transfers they receive.

"That money has to bring results," she says.

Other health care groups say they are pleased to see the premiers collaborating through the council's Health Care Innovation Working Group, which was established in January 2012 and has had its mandate extended for three more years.

Karen Cohen, co-chair of the Health Action Lobby (HEAL), representing 36

health care provider and consumer organizations including the Canadian Medical Association, supported the efforts of the premiers and the working group. "It's going to take collaboration between stakeholders to create a better system," said Cohen.

The Canadian Pharmacists Association is also pleased with progress, but stated in a media release that money saved by bulk-purchasing drugs should be put back into pharmacist-provided services.

In the upcoming year, the Health Care Innovation Working Group will focus on seniors' care and reducing unnecessary medical tests. Its new leaders are premiers Kathleen Wynne from Ontario, Alison Redford from Alberta, and Darrell Pasloski (who is also a pharmacist) from the Yukon Territory.

— Catherine Cross, *CMAJ*

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