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Health care organizations wait to talk to citizenship minister about cuts to refugee benefits

Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism Minister Jason Kenney has so far failed to agree to repeated requests by national health care organizations for a meeting to discuss cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) providing health benefits to refugees.

“Mr. Kenney has displayed and exhibited a measure of contempt never before seen by a federal Cabinet minister to the leaders of the health professions in Canada,” says Dr. Philip Berger, head of family medicine at Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital and a leading member of Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care.

On May 18, 2012, Berger's organization, the heads of the Canadian Medical Association, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the Canadian Nurses Association, the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Dental Association, the Canadian Pharmacists Association, the Canadian Association of Optometrists, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers signed a letter decrying changes to the federal health program. Changes that took effect June 30, 2012, cut benefits to many categories of refugee claimants, failed refugee claimants and those who withdrew their claims, whether valid or not.

Subsequently, other national health care organizations including the Canadian Psychiatric Association and the Canadian Association of Midwives also wrote to Kenney opposing the cuts and requesting a response.

The initial group of national organizations wrote to Kenney again in December repeating their concerns and requesting a response.

In February 2013, Ana Curic, Kenney's spokesperson, said the minister had met with “several different health-care organizations, various doctors, as well as different hospitals across the country” on this issue. The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration did not respond to *CMAJ's* request that it disclose the dates of any of those meetings and with whom the minister met.

However, the minister has not met the group of the nine organizations who signed on to the initial letters to discuss cuts to the refugee health program, nor has he met individually with the leaders of the Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care, the Canadian Association of Optometrists, the Canadian Psychiatric Association or the Canadian College of Family Physicians, spokespeople from all of those organizations told *CMAJ*.

On Jan. 11, some representatives of Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care met with Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird and some Citizenship and Immigration officials to discuss the health program cuts, but Kenney did not attend the meeting.

Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care filed a challenge in Federal Court on Feb. 25 asking for a judicial review of the changes and alleging that they violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In a scum outside the House of Commons, Kenney accused the

doctors of being “left-wing militants” who were “ideologically motivated” and belonged to “hard-core pressure groups.”

The College of Family Physicians of Canada does not consider itself a hard-core pressure group or a left-wing militant organization, says Eric Mang, director of health policy and government relations for the college.

“Those sorts of comments don't change the fact that a number of vulnerable patients aren't getting access to care. That's really the issue for us,” says Mang.

In a May 31, 2012, response to the Canadian Association of Midwives, a Citizenship and Immigration official compared refugee health coverage to that of other Canadians: “Simply put, the reform of the IFHP is needed to ensure fairness for Canadians, the majority of whom do not have government-funded coverage of the full cost of medications, assistive devices and the like. The program is re-focused on its core mandate of providing temporary, limited coverage of health care benefits, while protecting public health and safety.”

Kenney made a similar response in the House of Commons on Feb. 25.

“Canadian taxpayers have no obligation to provide gold-plated health insurance to illegal immigrants who have been deemed by our fair and generous legal system not to be refugees,” Kenney said.

In fact, the program only provided equivalent benefits to what anyone on social assistance would receive, says Berger. — Laura Eggertson, Ottawa, Ont.

Editor's note: This is a follow-up to previous *CMAJ* news story “**Doctors promise protests along with court challenge to refugee health cuts.**”

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