Opinion polls consistently indicate that health care remains a main concern of Canadians, while health care expenditures now amount to 10.3% of Canada’s gross domestic product, “the highest level in more than 30 years,” according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

Health care spending is now annually in the neighbourhood of $150 billion. In 2006, overall health spending increases outstripped inflation and population growth — for the tenth consecutive year.

In light of those staggering numbers, it would be reasonable to expect that health care would be a major campaign issue, yet the 5 political parties contending for Oct. 14, 2008, votes have been remarkably silent on health care issues in the early run-up to Canada’s 40th general election.

The New Democrats and Greens were by far the most prescriptive in response, saying they’d focus new investments on health promotion and preventative measures such as “removing chemicals that are known to pose a risk to human health, promoting greater physical activity thereby reducing obesity rates, and imposing a national junk food tax.” They’d invest 1% (roughly $1.5 billion) of Canada’s health budget on promotion initiatives.

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The Bloc Québecois, meanwhile, reiterated their oft-stated position that health is a provincial jurisdiction and the federal government’s only role is to write cheques to the provinces.

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Are you in favour of a progressive licensing regime for pharmaceuticals? If so, does the proposed progressive drug licensing regime have the teeth to protect consumers and ensure that regulatory authorities can obtain evidence from pharmaceutical firms during the post-market surveillance process?

The Conservatives lined up squarely behind their proposed revisions (CMAJ 2007;176[9]:1261-2), arguing that the regime “would tailor oversight to risk and thus strike an appropriate balance between the freedom of Canadians to choose, and the protection of their health.” Industry laxity, they said, would be deterred by stiff $5 million fines.

The Liberals and Greens completely dodged the issue, while the New Democrats offered the most nuanced response, saying they would strengthen adverse reaction reporting requirements, while also raising the bar for initial market authorization licences, including “stronger application of the precautionary principle.” They would also fund a “drug effectiveness research network and the public reporting of clinical trials and their outcomes.” The Bloc expressed concern about trading off a lower threshold for market authorization at the expense of Canadian’s health.

Would you restore the public health ministry to full cabinet status?
The Liberals and New Democrats support the notion, while the Greens and Bloc side-stepped the issue. The Conservatives said public health is the responsibility of the Health Minister.

Are you in favour of a no-fault compensation scheme for medical mishaps? (CMAJ 2008;179[4]:309-11, CMAJ 2008;179[5]:407-9 and CMAJ 2008;179[6]:515-7). The Conservatives equated such compensation to “government auto insurance plans,” and said that’s the domain of the provinces. The Bloc concurred on jurisdictional grounds, while the Liberals and Greens said they’d be “open” to discussions on the issue. The New Democrats were the most amenable to pursuing a no-fault compensation scheme, saying that such a system “offers the best chance of achieving patient safety, patient compensation and physician accountability while protecting physicians financially.”

Since the new millennium, what is the single largest failure of a health minister in Canada?
The political spin was often dizzying in response. The Liberals tagged the Conservatives’ handling of the listeriosis outbreak and revisions to the food safety regulatory regime (see page 755), as a betrayal of public trust. The New Democrats said all past health ministers were equally culpable for the current physician shortage.

The Conservatives said predecessor Liberal governments were indifferent to wait times, while “history will undoubtedly judge the tragic refusal to compensate Hepatitis C victims for their pain and suffering as one of the greatest failures of any Canadian health minister.” The Greens declined to “point fingers,” while the Bloc offered no comment. —Wayne Kondro, CMAJ

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