

Pulse

Drug costs surpass spending on physicians

Spending on drugs (prescription and nonprescription) has surpassed the cost of physician services for the first time since data on Canadian health expenditures have been maintained.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information reports that drug costs have grown from 8.4% of total expen-

ditures in the late 1970s to 14.5% in 1997. Meanwhile, spending for physician services decreased from a high of 15.6% of the total in 1987 to 14.2% a decade later. Drug costs now rank behind only hospital expenditures in terms of share of health care spending.

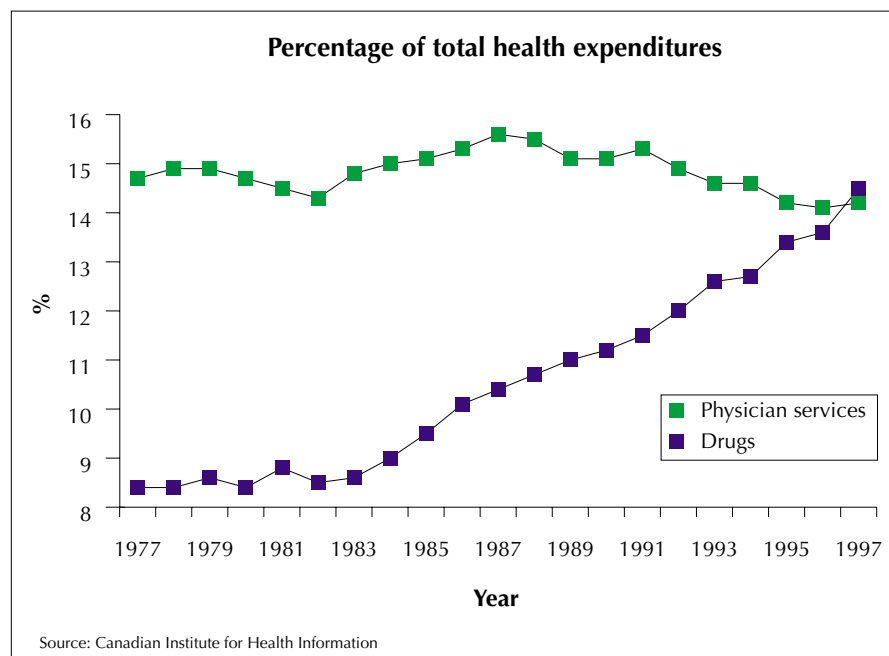
Canadians spent \$78-billion on

health care in 1997, up from \$76-billion in 1996, with per capita spending increasing from \$2548 to \$2598. Ontario and British Columbia had the highest rates of per capita spending, \$2746 and \$2728 respectively.

The share of health spending funded by governments fell from 70.4% in 1996 to 69.4% in 1997, but is expected to rebound slightly in 1998. The reversal would counter the long-term pattern of a decreasing public share in health spending that began in 1991, when the publicly funded portion stood at 75.8%. The private share now exceeds 30%, compared with 25% a decade ago.

Health care spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product stood at 8.9% in 1997, the lowest it has been since 1989. This places Canada fourth among the G-7 industrialized countries, behind the U.S. (13.9%), Germany (10.7%) and France (9.6%).

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; 800 663-7336, x2126; fax 613 565-2382).



Transport Canada to determine if new in-car devices affect safety

Transport Canada is examining the effect new in-car devices such as personal computers (PCs) and navigation tools have on driving. Unlike cell phones, these devices are factory installed and therefore come under Transport Canada jurisdiction through its safety-standards mandate.

Onboard intelligent transport systems (ITS), including PCs (phone and email), collision warning and driver navigation assistance devices, are starting to appear in vehicles. But do they affect driver performance? Studies involving in-car cell-phone use support both sides of the argument, but Transport Canada

hopes to settle the ITS debate by using innovative eye-tracking technology that quantifies how drivers allocate their attention. Ian Noye, head of the Ergonomics Division (road safety and motor vehicle regulation), expects results of the study to be available late in 2000.

With eye-tracking technology, subjects wear a headset that tracks pupil movement and also contains a camera to record the view. The 2 sets of results are later matched so that researchers can assess where drivers are looking at a given time.

The system's manufacturer, ELMAR Inc. of Downsview, Ont., pre-

sented results of its pilot study when the Association of Canadian Ergonomists met last fall. They found that drivers using a cell phone spend 72% of their time looking at a tiny area quite low on the horizon. Those who weren't using the phone scanned the environment appropriately.

Noye says that using hand-held cell phones while driving is against the law in many countries, including Australia, Israel and Spain; the UK is considering a similar ban. In Canada, where in-car cell phones are a provincial responsibility, similar laws don't exist yet. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*