



Features

Chroniques

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CMA revisits privatization issue, says “No thanks” once again

Steven Wharry

In brief

The massive media coverage given this year's CMA annual meeting was a clear sign of Canadians' concern over the future of medicare. General Council used the meeting to challenge the federal government to fund health care “to a level sufficient to meet the needs of Canadians.” As one delegate stated, it's time for Ottawa to “fund it or free it.”

En bref

La couverture médiatique massive que l'assemblée annuelle de l'AMC a suscitée cette année démontre clairement que l'avenir de l'assurance-maladie préoccupe les Canadiens. Le Conseil général a profité de l'assemblée pour mettre le gouvernement fédéral au défi de financer les soins de santé «à un niveau suffisant pour répondre aux besoins des Canadiens». Comme l'a dit un délégué, il est temps qu'Ottawa «finance le système ou le libère».

Delegates attending the CMA's 130th annual meeting in Victoria last month reaffirmed their support for publicly funded health care and challenged Ottawa to do the same by boosting health care spending. “Fund it or free it,” said one delegate, a comment later referred to the federal health minister, Allan Rock.

Although there was debate over allowing an increased role for private spending in health care, it hardly raged among the approximately 220 delegates attending this year's meeting. In fact, it appeared that reporters were more interested in discussing the controversial option than physicians. In the CMA's 130 years, an annual meeting has never had heavier media coverage. The meeting received several days of front-page stories in all of Canada's major newspapers and was also the lead item on CBC TV's *National* news and *News magazine*.

The immediate past president, Dr. Judith Kazimirski, said she knows why: medicare affects every Canadian. “The physicians of Canada once again came out very strongly in support of a strong public system. As physicians we see that underfunding in the system is causing needless suffering. The difference in the discussion this year [compared with the last 2 annual meetings] is that physicians clearly felt that endorsing privatization would let government off the hook.”

In setting aside the privatization issue, General Council called on Ottawa to fund medicare at a level sufficient to meet the health care needs of Canadians. The decision was made during a strategic session on the future of health care that was designed to map physician involvement in potential new models of funding, management and delivery of care. Many physicians said it is time for Ottawa to back up its promises to protect medicare with more than rhetoric.

“We are advocates for our patients and they have said they want to stick with a public system,” said Jasper, Alta., family physician Jill Konkin. “It's time we all stood up and said we want adequate funding for it.”

Even proponents of increased privatization agreed that if funding for the public system is adequate arguments in favour of privatization will become moot. “The federal government can put an end to this discussion by funding our medical system properly,” said Dr. Dan MacCarthy of Burnaby, BC. “Fund it or free it.”



A kinder, gentler minister?

In his first speech as federal health minister, lawyer Allan Rock told physicians he is eager to work with them on all fronts, including determining where more funding is needed. His tone was decidedly more conciliatory than that of his predecessor, David Dingwall, and went over well with delegates.

"It's not a good sign when the physicians of Canada say there is a problem in health care, so I propose we look at where those problems are and develop solutions together," he said.

During his speech and in his answers to the questions that followed, Rock stressed the need to gather more hard data on shortcomings within the health care system. He also acknowledged that Canadians are anxious about the future of medicare and the effect that funding cuts have had.

"There is no doubt there is a growing public anxiety about the state and the future of health care," he said. "The sources of that anxiety are clear: funding caps or cuts by governments, federal and provincial."

He was referring to results from 6 public dialogue sessions conducted across the country by the CMA and

Angus Reid Group, and released at the meeting. They revealed that Canadians realize funding cuts are causing the problems they face in gaining access to care. "This anxiety is obviously reason for concern," said Rock. "That is why I'm saying 'Show me.' If there is an inadequacy in the system, let's deal with it."

He answered several questions from the floor and frankly admitted that he does not know where funding for new national pharmacare and home care programs will come from. They were part of the Liberal platform in the June federal election and were marketed heavily in that campaign. However, he did say that the government will be examining the programs' feasibility in coming months and will be approaching the CMA and other parties for information.

By extending an olive branch to physicians, Rock succeeded in creating a feeling of optimism that the federal government is finally ready to listen to physicians' concerns.

"He has done a great deal of work in preparation for his new role and I applaud him for that," Dr. Léo-Paul Landry, the CMA secretary general, said of the former justice minister. "But this is not a honeymoon period and we won't put aside our objectives." †

Don't ignore medical care: CMA

During the annual meeting's strategic session on the future of health, General Council delegates reaffirmed the importance of physicians and organized medicine even as patients take more responsibility for their own health care.

Although they recognized that patients now have considerably more access to medical information through resources such as the Internet, physicians cautioned that information is no substitute for medical care.

"It is important that, as physicians, we understand these changes that are occurring," said Dr. Don Morgan, the Fredericton obstetrician who chairs the CMA Council on Health Care and Promotion. "We must identify areas where our expertise can contribute positively to the process of change and we must ensure that our expertise is utilized."

The session centred on the need to establish the roles of physicians as the concepts behind health and its determinants change, and to stem growing emphasis on determinants of health at the expense of medical care.

Following the session, then CMA President Judith Kazimirski told reporters that even though physicians recognize that determinants such as nutrition and economic factors play a large role in determining the over-

all health of Canadians, medical services will always be needed.

"Broader determinants of health play a very important role in the overall health of the population but people still get ill and they'll still need medical care," said Kazimirski.

Physicians discussed several health promotion issues and passed numerous resolutions during the meeting.

- They asked Canada's ministries of health to work together to increase public awareness of women who are at risk of substance-use disorders during pregnancy and to provide consistent interventions and treatment.
- They decided the CMA supports an international ban on antipersonnel landmines.
- They decided that governments should require training and licensing of operators of powered watercraft and snowmobiles.
- They decided that the CMA supports principles of parental control over television content through the use of built-in television-receiver technology.
- They issued a call for the federal government to reaffirm, at the Kyoto Convention on Climate Change this December, its position on achieving a 20% reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2005.