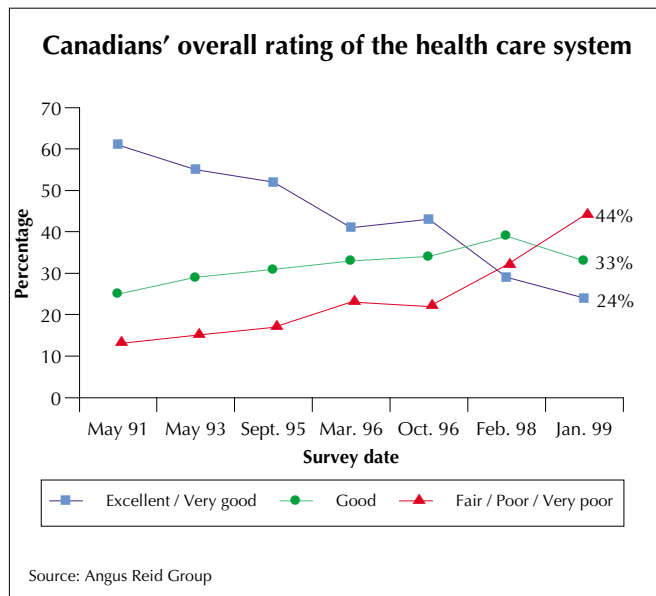




Pulse

Medicare's reputation in free fall before budget

Recent public opinion polls indicate that the number of Canadians who consider the health care system excellent or very good has fallen from a high of 60% in 1991 to a low of 24% in 1999. Meanwhile, the proportion of Canadians rating it fair or poor peaked this year at 44%. The results help explain Ottawa's concentration on health care in the February federal budget.



More than half of the 1999 respondents (57%) said the quality of health care had worsened in their community during the past 2 years, and most placed the blame on provincial governments (51%).

In February Canadians were also asked about the top issues Canada's leaders should address and 58% of respondents cited health care without being prompted; this response was most common in Alberta (63%). Unemployment was the second most cited issue (21%). This contrasts sharply with a year ago, when only 15% cited health care as a top issue and 35% mentioned unemployment.

Women were more likely to cite health care as an important issue (65%) than men (51%), and those over age 55 were more concerned (67%) than those aged 35 to 54 (56%).

More than three-quarters of Canadians (76%) felt that the February budget was "on the right track" and 42% believed that the money the federal government injected into the health care system will bring noticeable improvements in the quality of health care. However, more than half of respondents (54%) felt the budget will have little impact on health care.

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; 613 731-8610 or 800 663-7336, x2126; fax 613 565-2382).

Dental journal challenges Health Canada's new mercury levels

Canada's leading dental journal says a recent Health Canada decision to lower the recommended daily exposure to mercury for women of child-bearing age and children younger than 10 "does not seem to be based on any new scientific finding of human toxicity." A study in the January issue of the *Canadian Dental Association Journal* (65:42-6) reports that the new lower limit recommended by Health Canada is 95% below the level that may cause health problems. (The article is available online, www.cda-adc

[.ca/jcda/vol-65/issue-1/42.html](http://www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-65/issue-1/42.html).)

Mercury levels are a major issue for dentists because mercury is found in dental amalgam.

Dr. Derek Jones of Dalhousie University reports that a person would have to have 490 amalgam surfaces to meet maximum exposure guidelines established by Health Canada. He also considers amalgam fillings too easy a target. Jones, a professor of biomaterials, notes that "the uptake of food-related organic mercury is 6 times higher than the uptake of mercury from amalgam.

Moreover, food-related mercury is significantly more toxic." Jones also argues that many studies of amalgam-related mercury are flawed "by confusion between exposure and absorption for the various forms of mercury, a limited selection of data, the ignoring of confounding variables or the misclassification of data."

Dental amalgam is currently the subject of a class-action lawsuit launched against the federal government and suppliers of amalgam by Canadians for Mercury Relief.