

PULSE

Canada ranks near top in health spending: OECD

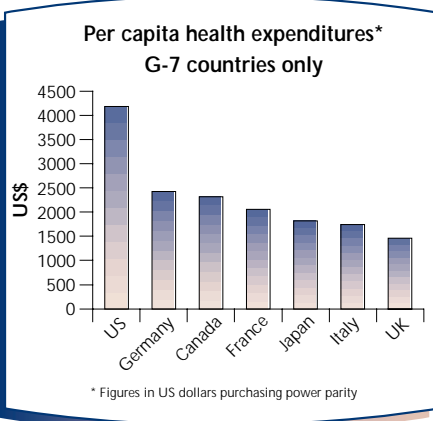
Data released last year indicate that Canada tied for fourth among 27 members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1998 in terms of

health spending as a percentage of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The United States devoted the highest percentage of GDP to health (13.6%), followed by Germany (10.6%) and Switzerland (10.4%). Canada was tied with France at 9.5% of GDP. Canada's relative position and spending level have been steady for several years.

Canada also placed fifth in per-capita spending on health, behind the US, Switzerland, Germany and Norway.

Canada spent \$2312 per person on health in 1998 (\$US purchasing power parity), compared with \$1461 spent in the United Kingdom. Per-capita spending in the US, at \$4178, more than doubled that of Australia, \$2036.

When public spending as a percentage of total health expenditures is considered, Canada fell to 18th position. The OECD data show that 69.6% of total spending was financed by the public purse in 1998, although recent statistics from the Canadian Institute for Health Information indicate that this percentage is increasing and is estimated to stand at 70.4% in 2000. — *Lynda Buske, buskel@cma.ca*



Damaged lungs. A dissected brain. A hacking smoker. It's enough to make anyone quit.

That's what Health Canada is hoping with its new graphic health warnings that began appearing on cigarette packs Jan. 1, 2001 (www.infotobacco.com). Canada is the first country to implement such strong labelling measures. The new Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey indicates that 6 million Canadians smoke — about 25% of the population aged 15 and older. Smoking by teens aged 15–19 appears to have plateaued at about 28% of that population.

Asbestos manufacturers dodge litigation

Companies that are otherwise financially fit are declaring bankruptcy in a bid to escape endless asbestos-related litigation (pages 489, 491, 495). Twenty-five of the 140 businesses that once sold asbestos products in the US have already filed for bankruptcy, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in December.

In the US bankruptcy is an expensive proposition, since American law requires companies declaring bankruptcy to create a "qualified settlement fund" or trust for future claimants. This generally amounts to at least 51% of the company's net worth. Financial claims made in lawsuits can be debilitating. For example, Owens Corning settled 240 000 asbestos-related claims for \$1.7 billion before it filed for bankruptcy protection.

Closer to home, members of Parliament are moving out of the Wellington Building on Parliament Hill in Ottawa after an environmental assessment in November revealed that there were large amounts of asbestos dust in ventilation ducts, stairwells and elsewhere. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Private PET-scanning clinic opens in Vancouver

The first private positron-emission tomography (PET) scanning clinic in Canada offering full-body scans is open for business in Vancouver. The PETscan Centre, located on the campus of the University of British Columbia, is owned by International PET Diagnostics Inc., a BC company led by architect Denis Tusar. It is currently open 2 days per week and charges \$2500 per scan. It has an annual capacity of 2000 patient scans, and the owners expect it will be operating at full capacity — 5 days per week — by year's

end. The scans are used to diagnose diseases such as cancer and to conduct brain-related research. There are currently 5 of the machines in Canada.

"We could soon [surpass] the abilities of 1 scanner," says Dr. Simon Sutcliffe, CEO of the BC Cancer Agency (BCCA).

The opening of the private facility follows unsuccessful attempts by the BCCA and Vancouver Hospital to convince the province to fund a public centre. The PET scanner plus the cyclotron unit to manufacture the radioactive compound needed to produce the scan

costs about \$6 million. Operating costs for the cyclotron are about \$1.5 million annually.

Sutcliffe says the PET scanner is particularly useful in diagnosing certain types of cancer, particularly cancer of the lung, breast and colon, as well as lymphoma. The main advantage of the machines is their superior imaging clarity. Sutcliffe says PET scanners will almost certainly replace some other types of investigation currently used in the management of cancer patients. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*