

Budget 2001: "We won't fund your tax cuts," Rock warns provinces

The advance billing cast the federal budget as balanced, in every sense of the word. It would keep the books in the black, while simultaneously placing pressing needs in areas like security, innovation and health care on an equal footing. But there was little doubt security measures were the marquee item Dec. 10 as Finance Minister Paul Martin tried to come to grips with economic life after Sept. 11 by presenting his first full budget in nearly 2 years.

In the wake of Sept. 11, the ensuing war in Afghanistan and the global economic slowdown, grand plans for other investments were dramatically curtailed. The bulk of Martin's new money, \$7.7 billion over 5 years, was funnelled into a comprehensive set of security measures.

These have a significant health component, with \$513 million being set aside over 5 years for infrastructure related to the handling of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats. Health Minister Allan Rock said the new money will be used to buy smallpox vaccine, train health workers and expand laboratory facilities.

Although security measures didn't entirely crowd out other priorities, they left little room for further increases in cash transfers for health care, federal officials said during the budget lock-up. However, the budget did reaffirm Ottawa's commitment to honour health care funding agreements reached with the provinces in September 2000.

CMA President Henry Haddad said that isn't good enough: "The federal government could have done and should have done more to address the problem of the crisis of access in health care."

Missing from the budget, said Haddad, were measures such as the indexing of federal cash transfers and lifting of the cap on equalization payments for poorer provinces.

CMA Secretary General Bill Tholl said measures to address the renewal of the health care work force were also missing. "If this were a CMA report card, we'd give them an 'A' on the urgent and a 'C' on the important."

Nor did the budget include "targeted funding to develop home, community or long-term-care programs," noted Canadian Healthcare Association President Sharon Sholzberg-Gray. "There's still unfinished business as regards the health system."

Rock argued that the Health Renewal Agreement signed in 2000 already provides annual increases in federal transfers. "We've escalated, very considerably," he told reporters, while lashing out at the Ontario government for demanding more money. "They're threatening the elderly and the needy with cuts in home care and other essential services unless they get more money from the federal government. I tell you, they're holding the health care system ransom. Their demands are unreasonable. They've made choices to reduce their own revenues and now they expect us to pay for their tax cuts? Come on."

With the federal budget being filtered through the prism of Liberal leadership ambitions, Rock emerged from the exercise with a pocketful of major victories, including a 15.4% hike in the budget of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research — more than twice what Industry Minister Brian Tobin could muster for sister granting councils in the natural and social sciences.

Rock also collected \$95 million to cover operations at the Canadian Institute for Health Information for the next 4 years and \$10 million for ongoing research at BC's Genome Sequence Centre. — *Wayne Kondro, Ottawa*

New rules for chemicals may reduce household mishaps

Tough new packaging and labelling requirements for consumer products such as cleansers are expected to reduce the number of chemical-related mishaps in Canada and save the health care system about \$10 million a year.

The Consumer Chemicals and Containers Regulations, which were approved Oct. 1, call for leak-proof containers, more child-resistant packaging and extensive information on hazards. "The old regulations were based on outdated science from the '70s and there were too many products falling through the holes," says Paul Chowhan, scientific project officer at Health Canada's Consumer Products Safety Bureau.

The new rules take effect Sept. 30, 2003, and apply to all potentially hazardous consumer products, including some plumbing supplies. They don't apply to workplace and pest-control products, foods, drugs or cosmetics.

Every product will be placed in 1 of 5 new product hazard categories: toxic, corrosive, flammable, quick skin-bonding adhesives and pressurized containers. Consumers won't see a huge difference in product labelling — the hazard symbols will look the same — but new data such as treatment information will have to be displayed prominently.

Most of the injuries to children under age 5 result from ingesting products; inhalation of harmful vapours from solvents, contact adhesives or spray paints are among the main causes of adult injuries.

There are an estimated 50 000 incidents involving consumer chemical products in Canada every year, and they result either in injury or illness that requires medical attention, or in property damage of \$50 or more. Health Canada estimates that they lead to \$628 million in medical and social costs each year; the changes are expected to reduce these by \$9.9 million. — *Ken Kilpatrick, Hamilton*



Steven Wharry

The CMA's Haddad with reporters: "Ottawa could have done and should have done more."