

'Gammon's law and a change in thinking?'

This year's CUA meeting will be different because a national election will take place in mid-meeting (Monday June 28). This is the first election in a decade where Canadians have a serious choice of government. The attendees will have the opportunity to view the results together.

Which makes the current lack of serious debate about health care all the more ironic. Canadians must wonder if they have been caught in some type of election-related Chinese Water Torture, condemned to hear the same repetitive dripping, (a 'new' health initiative), over and over and over. To the point where we'll agree to anything to make it stop.

In early June, the Liberals made their first major announcement: more money for health care. 'This will be our number 1 priority as a government' said Paul Martin. Jean Chrétien made exactly the same promise of an 'action plan that will ensure...timely access to quality health care' in 1997, 2000, and March of 2003. Such promises are now standard fare in Canadian politics. Pierre Pettigrew, the Federal minister of health, mused about privatization and was forced to recant immediately. Martin's pledge is from the same party, the same thinking, with the same approach; and the results will be the same.

Steven Harper, who has a reputation for principled politics, is unwilling to touch the structure of the Canada Health Act, widely acknowledged to be the '3rd rail' of politics (touch it and you die). While he has taken a baby step by proposing private partnerships, he's defended the concept of the single payer, with all the ramifications of centralized decision-making and a socialist mentality that that involves. Surprising for a conservative politician, except in Canada. In this regard, the concept of changing the Canada Health Act is like abortion, gay marriage, and capital punishment—politicians want to avoid it like the plague for fear of getting their re-election prospects mortally infected.

Widespread public acknowledgement of the health care system's woes, including ubiquitous long surgical waiting lists, inadequate access to technology, and widespread deficiencies in availability of doctors and nurses, has not resulted in a shift amongst our politicians. Health spending in Canada has skyrocketed, from \$78.5 billion in 1997 to 121.4 billion in 2003 (a 57% increase). Money has poured in; and yet there is no apparent improvement; in fact, the opposite.

Max Gammon, a British physician interested in public policy, observed in Britain that expenditures in the 60s increased substantially in the NHS, but there was no improvement in the quality of care. After prolonged study, he formulated Gammon's Law: 'In a bureaucratic system, increase in expenditure will be matched by fall in production.' Such systems, he reasoned, act like economic black holes, simultaneously sucking in resources and shrinking in terms of 'emitted production'.

In Canada, funding is up but outcomes aren't. Emergency rooms are packed, patients wait months for tests, OR access remains restricted, and many patients can't find family doctors. This is not primarily related to the aging of the population, since the demographic bulge has not changed substantially since 1997. Nor has new technology consumed 57% of new money. Gammon's Law is in effect.

Will Canadian politicians catch up to ordinary Canadians in acknowledging the need for change? It may be that a resurgent Conservative party, ideologically more open to the benefits of market forces, may move loosening of the Canada Health Act straightjacket forward more rapidly. It may be that Harper is more amenable to this than he lets on, but believes that in 2004 no political leader can state this and be elected. Obviously a Liberal minority government, with the NDP sharing power, can be counted on to block any entrepreneurial initiatives in health care for the foreseeable future.

Prime Minister Kim Campbell famously said, as her party headed towards oblivion, that 'elections are not the time to discuss serious issues'. It is tragic that there is no sensible discussion of a blended public-private system, similar to almost every other country in the world (Cuba, North Korea, and Canada being the 3 exceptions). Perhaps a change in government will herald a change in the willingness to consider new solutions.

Laurence H. Klotz
Editor-in-Chief