

Five things **you** should know about wait times

Supporters of private, for profit health care have used concerns about wait times to push for private finance and for-profit health care delivery. They argue that letting people who can afford to pay for private health care purchase medical services from private clinics will reduce waiting times across the country by removing patients from the public system. While governments continue to talk about wait time problems, they ignore the real issues causing medical delays.

Here are five things you should know about the real problems causing wait times:

1. **There are no accurate statistics about wait times.** According to leading health policy analyst Dr. Michael Rachlis, there is very little information available on wait times. Some provinces have made efforts to establish Internet-based lists, but these numbers are typically provided by doctors and are not independently verified. Doctors, in general, keep individual wait lists and often there is no coordinating body to help share this information.



2. **Canada has a serious shortage of health care providers.** One of the main reasons for longer wait times in Canada is the fact that we do not have enough doctors, nurses, radiologists and other health care providers. In some areas of the country, 60 per cent of people have no family doctor, and the problem is worse in rural areas. The proposed use of for-profit private clinics would pull health care providers into the private system, making wait

times even longer in the public system, as shown at Winnipeg's Maples Surgical Centre. The centre is offering MRI scans for \$695, and these are being done by two technologists who left jobs at the public Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg to work at Maples. According to media reports, the public facility had to cut back its own MRI operations because of the resulting staffing shortage.



3. **"Guarantees" are no guarantee.** When he was first elected, Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised the government would "work with the provinces" on a health care guarantee so patients could receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times. If they don't get care within that time, they could go to another province, to the United States or to a private clinic and the government would pick up the tab. But at a conference organized by the Canadian Health Coalition, Manitoba Health Minister Tim Sale said the provinces have already spent a year discussing health care guarantees and have concluded they can't meet guarantees without addressing other problems in the public system. Dr. Brian Postl, Federal Wait Times Advisor, also confirmed that moving patients from one province to another, or into private clinics, only displaces the problem.

4. **Money alone won't solve the problem.** The 2004 First Ministers Health Accord committed \$41 billion to health care system improvements, including \$5.5 billion over 10 years to reduce wait times. Benchmarks were established in December 2005 in five key health care areas that have been prone to longer waiting times. But Dr. Postl cautioned that it's not just about putting money in the system. He says creating centralized wait lists, getting away from a paper system and using electronic technology to share information,

addressing the staffing shortage and in some cases, the facility and equipment shortages, are all key to reducing wait times.

5. Wait lists can be reduced in the public system. There is a growing list of examples of how wait times can be addressed in the public system. The B.C. based Richmond Hip and Knee Reconstruction Project is one of them. By providing centralized assessment clinics, patients were seen, on average, 17 days after referral from a family physician. Wait times to see a specialist were decreased from 35 weeks to six weeks, and wait times for surgery went from 47 weeks down to less than five weeks. Patients also experienced shorter stays with coordinated follow-up by their family physicians. Evidence has shown that sending patients to private clinics not only costs more, it also results in inferior care.



Profit is not the cure

Contrary to what the private health care advocates would argue, wait times are not the problem, and pouring public dollars into private health care is definitely not the solution. Addressing doctor, nurse and other health care professional shortages, creating centralized waiting lists, and building on “success stories” in the public system are all ways to strengthen Canada’s public health care system. The solutions to wait lists are readily available in the public system. What is needed is the political will to implement them.

Take action!

Demand that Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the government stand up for quality, timely, publicly funded health care. Public dollars should never pay for private health care.

Contact Prime Minister Harper today!

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