

# Dr. Profit Puts Public Health Care on Trial



by Michael Butler



Council of Canadians supporters and chapter activists across Canada took part in a national day of action for public health care at the end of March. The day of action drew attention to creeping health care privatization and to the Harper government's decision to let the health care accord expire.

This fall, possibly the most significant constitutional challenge in Canadian history will put our medicare on trial. The very founding principle of public health care and one of Canada's deepest held values – that health care must be delivered based on a person's need and not the ability to pay – is at stake.

The B.C. government is facing an unprecedented lawsuit (Cambie Surgeries Corporation et al. v. Medical Services Commission et al.) launched by a group of for-profit medical clinic owners. Led by Dr. Brian Day, who has been dubbed "Dr. Profit" in the media, the case will use the courts to smuggle an American-style two-tier health care system into Canada. Even though this case is going to court in B.C. it is a national issue that affects the health care of all Canadians. A decision in favour of the private clinic owners would impact every provincial and territorial health care insurance plan.

For years Dr. Day has been openly ignoring health care laws at the public's expense. A 30-day audit conducted by the B.C. government in 2012 of Dr. Day's Cambie Surgery Centre revealed the clinic unlawfully billed nearly \$500,000 to patients

and the B.C. health care system. The same audit also produced evidence of overlapping claims – where a patient and B.C.'s Medical Services Plan were billed for the same procedure – totalling an additional \$66,000. This practice is known as "double-dipping." This shows what the case is really about: greed, not better care.

If Dr. Day wins, doctors and private insurance companies across Canada could start setting their own prices and charging patients for services. Cambie Surgery Clinic, which is being subsidized by Canadian tax dollars and resources, charges up to six times more than the public system for procedures. This would allow rich people who can afford to pay for health care services jump ahead in the queue while the rest of us wait. It would also mean that all citizens would subsidize the cost of care that only a wealthy few will be able to afford. Ultimately, this case could determine whether we will lose medicare, the public health care our families rely on.

## Private care means longer waits

Private clinics have been shown to increase wait times in the public system by "cherry-picking" patients who need straightforward treatments, leaving the complex (and

more costly) cases to the public system. Private clinics also poach physicians from the public system since they can earn more in a publicly subsidized private system. Studies continue to show that in addition to higher costs, patients treated in for-profit settings have poorer health outcomes and higher mortality rates than those treated in a public non-profit setting.

What Dr. Day is proposing is a no-win situation for ordinary Canadians.

Now, more than ever, we must demand our governments and leaders protect, strengthen and expand our public health care. The Canada Health Act requires that all Canadians have access to equitable, timely, high quality care. We have the right to demand that a precedent be set to warn other health professionals that illegally profiting off of people who are sick and vulnerable will not be tolerated, and that those who attempt this will be prosecuted. We have the right to demand that Dr. Day and those like him who only see dollar signs in health care stop jeopardizing our most fundamental Canadian value: universal medicare.

Michael Butler is the Health Care Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.