



Jasen Robillard

Right: Council of Canadians Health Care Campaigner Michael Butler joined with other public health care advocates to lobby Conservative MP Lisa Raitt. The Council of Canadians is calling for a new health care accord, a national pharmacare program, a seniors' strategy and the end to privatization of health care services.

## Promoting Public Health Care on the Hill

The Council of Canadians joined with public health care advocates from across Canada during National Medicare Week to lobby MPs on Parliament Hill. Five Council of Canadians representatives participated in some of the more than 140 meetings held, telling MPs that Canada needs federal leadership in health care.

Lobbying – people meeting with their MPs to talk about issues that affect them – is an important public policy intervention that can effect change for the greater good. Everyone is affected by problems in the health care system

and should have a say in shaping the policies and solutions needed for a better future for all of us.

After nearly a decade of neglect under the Harper government, Canada's medicare is entering the most important period since its creation. It is crucial that the Liberal government strengthens the foundations of medicare, Canada's most cherished social program.

To encourage MPs to strengthen medicare, volunteers taking part in the health care lobby focused on four key issues.



The first issue was the health accord, which the former Harper government let expire in 2014, leaving provinces and territories without stable funding and facing a decreased federal role in health care. Lobbyists called for a new 10-year deal with increased federal funding to cover at least 25 per cent of provincial health care costs.

The Canada Health Act (CHA) was another point of discussion as the health system faces more pressure to privatize services. Lobbyists stated the health accord must include conditions that link funding with upholding the

principles of the act. When violations occur, the federal government must enforce the CHA.

Third, the health accord must include funds for a National Seniors Strategy. Seniors across Canada should have access to quality public hospitals, acute care, home care, long-term care, palliative care and hospice care. This continuum of care should fall under the principles of the CHA, whether in hospital or outside of it. Instead of a patchwork across the country, we need a strategy to help seniors live healthy lives with dignity.

Finally, Canada remains the only OECD country with medicare that does not have a national pharmacare system. This means that 1 in 5 Canadians cannot afford to fill their prescriptions, which leaves millions of people in poorer health. Studies have shown that up to \$11 billion could be saved annually through a universal and comprehensive pharmacare program.

Leo Broderick, a Council of Canadians Board member and chapter activist from Prince Edward Island, was part of a group that met with four different MPs.

The MPs – all Atlantic-based Liberals – were supportive of a new health accord and a strategy to deal with the health issues of our aging population. All had favourable comments about a national pharmacare program so people can get the prescription drugs they need, but some expressed concern about how to pay for it. On the question of enforcing the national standards in the Canada Health Act, including the ban on extra billing and user fees and enforcement of reporting requirements, Broderick said MPs were reluctant to be heavy handed.

With the campaign trail fresh in their minds, Broderick said MPs heard from people who were concerned about finding a family doctor, longer wait times, and the rising costs of prescription drugs.

“My overall impression from listening to all four Liberal MPs is that the Finance Minister and the message he is giving to the Liberal caucus – a message

that the fiscal reality will make it difficult to fulfill election promises – will diminish their commitment to fully protecting Canada’s medicare system, or to push for major improvements,” said Broderick.

However, the federal government sets its spending priorities through the budget process. Additional health care funding could be found if it is a government priority.

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Council of Canadians Board members Ken Kavanagh and Andrea Furlong met with two Liberal MPs from Newfoundland and Labrador.

Both MPs were supportive of negotiating a new health care accord, but would not commit to reinstating the full amount of funding cut by the Harper government. MPs were also reluctant to impose standards of care in the new accord, saying provinces should have this responsibility.

Kavanagh likes the idea of more federal involvement. “As a Canadian citizen, I welcomed federal involvement in the health care in my province and wanted them to put conditions on their fiscal contribution to health care in the form of demanding national standards of care,” he said. “In my view, I am better protected with two levels of government looking after my health care needs.”

Furlong said both MPs seemed happy to have these meetings. Based on discussions, she felt confident there will be a new health care accord, but thought that MPs need more information about a national pharmacare plan before anything can move forward.

Privatization in the form of public-private partnerships was also on the table.

Ailish Morgan-Welden, an Organizing Assistant with the Council of Canadians, also felt the four Liberal MPs she spoke with were receptive to hearing from constituents. She did have some concern though that a lot of rebuilding is needed in the health care system after years of federal neglect and dismantling.

“I felt hopeful that the new government is at least open to hearing from constituents and lobby groups and that there seemed to be genuine openness to hearing feedback,” said Morgan-Welden. “But as a younger person, I did feel discouraged that many MPs did not seem willing to acknowledge the ways that the health care system is failing younger people, particularly those doing precarious work with no access to benefits.”

Michael Butler, Health Care Campaigner for the Council of Canadians, also lobbied four MPs, including Conservative MP Lisa Raitt. He hopes that more people will make the time to meet with their MPs.

“Lobbying can be a bit of a nerve wracking experience at first. It can feel a bit uncomfortable, but in order to make real progress we need to move beyond our comfort zones and the easy ‘clicktivism,’ which will (on its own) never bring about the medicare system we need.”

Later this spring the Council of Canadians will be joining health care advocates again to meet with MPs in their constituencies.

Broderick also encourages people to speak with their MPs. “Lobbying Members of Parliament is critical and we must, on a regular basis, keep meeting with our local MPs three or four times a year in their constituent offices,” he said. “We all understand too well the power that wealthy lobby groups wield in Ottawa. We also know that wealthy lobby groups are increasing their power and presence in Ottawa. Given this reality, our work to influence public policy through lobbying our MPs is even more important than ever.”