In November 2011, in the wake of one of the first meetings between provincial and territorial ministers to chart a new 10-year health care accord, former Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow warned that requiring provinces to cover more of the cost of funding health care services would create a “patchwork quilt Canada” of health coverage, with the have-not provinces losing out.

Romanow, who in 2001 headed a royal commission on the future of health care in Canada, told CTV’s Question Period that the Harper government’s plan to reduce federal funding for health care would seriously endanger medicare. “It would be the end of a national program of medicare,” he said.

The future of public health care is at a tipping point. Not only do we face the “patchwork quilt” Romanow warned us about, but without a new deal between the federal government and the provinces and territories in a new health accord, the seams on the quilt will start to rip apart.

We have 17 different health care systems in Canada – one for each province and territory plus federally administered systems for RCMP, military, prisons, and First Nations. The principle of portability in the Canada Health Act allows us to travel across the country and access services in any province or territory. However, people are starting to realize that not all provinces and territories cover the same services, and what is considered “medically necessary” in one area of Canada might not be covered in another.

When medicare was first introduced in Canada, the average age of Canadians was 27. Today, this average has increased by 20 years. We should be expanding the definition of “medically necessary” to cover additional services that more appropriately reflect the new Canadian demographic. Supporters of public health care, including the Council of Canadians, are calling on the federal, provincial and territorial governments to expand medicare and cover areas such as home and community care, including long-term care, mental and dental care, and pharmacare.

With the expiry of the 10-year 2004 Health Accord – and discussions for what the 2014 accord could contain – there is an opportunity for premiers and the prime minister to discuss the challenges in health care, work to protect the public health care system from those who want to profit from it, set new national standards on care, and implement new innovative and evidence-based programming to ensure all provinces and territories are able to offer the highest quality of care to their residents.

However, instead of working together to build a better health care system in Canada, the Harper government has downloaded more responsibility for health care onto the provinces and territories through cuts to health care for refugees, veterans and the RCMP.

In December 2011, the Harper government shockingly announced that the 2014 Health Accord will reduce the Canada Health Transfer (the portion that the federal government pays for health care) by $36 billion. Not surprisingly, the funding cut starts in 2016, after the next federal election.

The $36 billion reduction will mean that the 50-50 per cent cost-sharing agreement made by the federal and provincial/territorial governments when medicare was first negotiated will become 18 and 82 per cent respectively. Poorer provinces will be the worst off. With less money for health care, they will likely need to shorten the list of “medically necessary” services, and governments will inevitably look to more private, for-profit service delivery.

The Council of Canadians is working with national and provincial allies to rally Canadians against the cuts and to promote evidence-based solutions to our health care challenges.

The Council of the Federation – a meeting of Canada’s premiers – will be held July 24-26 in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. This will be our last chance to push for improvements in the 2014 Health Accord, and to make Canadians aware of the devastating cuts and creeping privatization that is already happening in our health care system.

Join us in Niagara-on-the-Lake and make noise for public health care

We want to fill the streets with people in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and have a strong public showing in support of a strengthened and enhanced public health care system. Visit our website at www.canadians.org, or call your local regional office for up-to-date information about rally plans. If you live in the vicinity, we hope you can join us!

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