

August 2, 2004

## Let the rich pay twice

As sound and fury rose last month over medicare, Ujjal Dosanjh, our new federal health minister, sternly warned the provincial premiers, "Canadians will not accept bickering over jurisdiction."

Well, it's true, nobody likes a "bickerer." But I have a question neither Dosanjh nor anyone else can answer about our medical system.

Who's in charge of it?

In Calgary you can now expect to wait almost three months for heart surgery, seven months for an MRI scan, and over a year for general surgery, knee surgery or a hip replacement.

This is ridiculous. In fact it's cruel. If you inflicted this on prisoners of war, you could be prosecuted under international law.

But if you're one of the 25,000 Calgarians who's hobbling around month after month in pain and fear, unable to work or sleep, who do you blame? Who is responsible?

The provincial premiers say they're supposed to be in charge, but Ottawa doesn't give them enough money. And Dosanjh says it's a shared responsibility between the two levels of government.

So *nobody's* responsible.

That is the central problem. We have a state monopoly for which nobody's accountable.

And it may be about to get even less accountable. A case was argued this spring before the Supreme Court of Canada. A ruling is expected this winter.

It was brought jointly by a 71-year-old Montreal businessman (George Zeliotis) who got frustrated waiting a year for hip surgery and eventually went to the U.S., and by an enterprising doctor (Jacques Chaoulli), who has built his own mobile emergency hospital but isn't allowed to operate it.

They are asking the court to strike down Quebec's two health insurance acts as infringing their right to operate outside the medicare monopoly. They claim that under the Charter's guarantee of "life, liberty and security of the person" (section 7) the government has no right to ban private medical alternatives.

The Supreme Court has three options.

It can declare that the medical monopoly is justified in the greater public good and the government can leave people suffering on waiting lists as long it likes.

Or it can preserve the monopoly but order the government to guarantee prompt treatment, setting off a surge in taxation without much improvement in services, because state monopolies always waste money.

Or the court can rule people are responsible for their own health and that a government monopoly is unjust. Anyone can "jump the queue" if they're willing to pay twice for medical services (first through their taxes and again through private fees).

Option three is best, and most countries have taken it. To doctrinaire socialists who object that the "rich will get better medical service," I say "Grow up." The "rich" (howsoever defined) get better everything. But by paying double and leaving the queue, they shorten it for the rest of us.

The point is not to make everyone suffer equally. The point is to have a medical system that works for everyone.

- Link Byfield

*Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.*

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