

Health care an ailing cow, not a sacred one

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May 19, 2011

It's back to business in Ottawa June 2nd, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper emphasizing the top priority of "our strong, stable, national government" will be the economy.

A poll last August by the Canadian Medical Association showed 71 per cent of Canadians think government should focus equally on health care and the economy.

Nine in 10 Canadians don't see real solutions being offered by government, which was the case in last month's federal election. The Conservative, Liberal and NDP leaders couldn't be prodded into legitimate debate, instead vowing to continue throwing money at a failing system.

You'd be living in a bubble not to know proliferate spending has made the system worse, not better.

I write this after a night out with friends, their frustration and concern still ringing in my ears.

One friend has waited more than a month to see a doctor about severe abdominal pain, while another's daughter waited seven hours in emergency after prolonged nausea, only to be told diagnostic was now closed.

Another friend's 17-year-old nephew was taken to emergency by ambulance at 6 p.m. after being hit by a car then sat alone until 1 a.m. When he finally called his mother, she took him home, appalled by the treatment — or, rather, lack of treatment.

We don't need to see the latest Fraser Institute physician survey to know long waits are the norm: we wait an average of 16 weeks to see a specialist after a referral; a 73-per-cent increase since the first survey in 1993.

Why is health care still a sacred cow, when many of us see a chronically ill system in need of a dose of common sense?

Speaking at the Canadian Club last week, Aurora auto magnate Frank Stronach shared his clear-eyed view: "Our health care system doesn't function anymore. We should have a two-tier system."

Leaving health care management to politicians focused on re-election has fuelled spiralling

costs and inefficiency, he said. Publicly financed care should be delivered by private companies meeting standards of quality and accountability and also providing care to people willing to pay for it.

Face it, thousands of Canadians already cross the border to do that.

Why are we threatened by the idea of cutting waste, improving quality and valuing customers?

Dianne Carmichael isn't.

After both her parents' illnesses, she felt compelled to advocate for patients and do something to strengthen a system in crisis. The former Newmarket resident left a successful career in wealth management to become president of Best Doctors Canada, a leading medical advisory firm.

In a speech to the Economic Club last month, she argued inaction and protectionism has fostered a two-tier system.

"We need to fix the problem, but we are own worst enemy — we're ferociously proud of the system," she told me.

"I don't have a problem with a two-tier system — we have elements of two-tier already — but I do have a problem with what we're seeing now; people are getting desperate, people are vulnerable."

The CMA poll found 80 per cent of us are worried about the quality and cost of health care. We want change.

Mr. Stronach will tell you change will require a "revolution" propelled by all of us.

For Ms Carmichael, the need for change is urgent, but we can't rely on politicians. She is attracting attention with a bid to get business leaders collaborating and leading the charge for reform and innovative solutions.

"We can't wait any longer, people are dying," she said, without a hint of drama in her tone.

Who could have imagined we'd be saying that about our once proud health care system?

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