

## Ontario Health Coalition

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**For Immediate Release**

**Attn: Assignment Editor**

### **Health Coalitions Accuse Harper Government of "Smoke and Mirrors" Health Strategy: Allowing Privatization and Not Improving the Public System**

Toronto - On Friday Health Ministers from all the provinces and territories will convene in Toronto for a conference on timely access to care. Health Coalitions from across Canada will be organizing protests and events at the same time to draw attention to the dangers of the Harper Health Strategy.

"Canadians should not allow ourselves to be manipulated. The Harper government has virtually abandoned public health care, turning a blind eye to privatization and stalling a national pharmacare plan. Harper has abdicated the federal government's responsibility to protect equal access to all by failing to enforce the Canada Health Act. His government is allowing open queue jumping for the wealthy. Harper's health strategy includes no concrete resources or federal coordination to improve access and reduce regional disparities," said Natalie Mehra, Director of the Ontario Health Coalition. "Harper is engaging in a "smoke and mirrors" health public relations campaign, making much out of small funding announcements, supporting for-profit privatization, and doing nothing substantive to improve the system."

"The conference called by the federal government this week underlines the absence of a meaningful federal role in improvements to the health system. The provinces are doing all the work and this shows clearly in the conference agenda," noted Mike McBane, Canadian Health Coalition coordinator.

"Clement is doing nationally what he did in Ontario. He has politicized very minor funding announcements to maximize public relations without providing substantive improvements. Harper's "Wait Time Guarantee" exploits wait times to promote a parallel private system or force patients to travel great distances. We already have a problem with regional disparities in the supply of health care and health human resources. Harper's plan and two-tier health care will do nothing but reduce the needed supply and coordination of doctors, nurses and health professionals in the public system, worsening access for most people," added Mike McBane, Canadian Health Coalition Coordinator. "This week, health coalitions from across Canada will gather in Toronto to send a clear message to Harper: stop promoting privatization, improve wait times in the public system, get on board for a national pharmacare strategy, and protect the single-tier public health system."

Backgrounder: Harper's Record on Medicare:

The final report of Dr. Brian Postl, Federal Wait Times Advisor, was buried by the Harper government. The comprehensive report proposing a concrete plan to deal with timely access was released on Canada Day Weekend last summer virtually guaranteeing no media coverage, Postl's contract ended and the report has been shelved.

In the 2004 Health Accord, one of the key agreements was the promised creation of a pharmaceuticals strategy for the estimated 3.5 million Canadians without any drug coverage. A first ministers' task force was mandated to report to Canadians in 2006 on progress. Tony Clement, Harper's Health Minister, is supposed to co chair the task force. The provinces cannot

create the plan without the federal government, but Mr. Clement has not supported the initiative. In fact, he did not attend the media conference in September to release the progress report of the task force he is supposed to co chair. (It should be of serious concern to Canadians that the federal health minister has been a 25% owner of a pharmaceutical company while occupying the position of health minister. Tony Clement finally gave up his shares this summer after public scandal.)

Harper has failed to enforce the Canada Health Act's provisions for equal access to medically necessary services in the face of flagrant violations by for-profit health clinics.

Harper has named Tony Clement as Health Minister, who, in his previous position as health minister in Ontario relentlessly pursued the unprecedented privatization of hospitals through private financing schemes, pushed through for-profit MRI and CT clinics, oversaw the tendering out of nursing homes to a majority of for-profit companies, and oversaw the cutting of publicly-funded home support services for thousands of Ontario seniors. Tony Clement is well-known as one of the authors of the Mike Harris "Common Sense Revolution" which redistributed income to the wealthiest Ontarians, gutting the health system and causing burgeoning wait lists.

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