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Attn: Assignment Editor

## **Protect Public Medicare as first priority, as Canada's Health Ministers gather to meet in Vancouver: Health Advocates**

Toronto/Vancouver – Urgent action must be taken to safeguard equal health care for all as a first priority as Health Ministers from across Canada gather in Vancouver this week, say advocates from the public health care watchdog the Ontario Health Coalition.

“We are seeing an alarming increase in user fees charged to patients in private clinics,” said Natalie Mehra, Executive Director of the Ontario Health Coalition. “Cuts and privatization have resulted in patients being charged hundreds or even thousands of dollars for needed tests and surgeries, in violation of the Canada Health Act and provincial laws. As the Health Ministers gather in British Columbia this week, we are calling on Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins to insist that the fundamental principle of equal health care for all, based on need not wealth, be upheld and enforced as a first priority; and funding be provided to meet population need for care.”

The coalition is advocating for Ontario's Health Minister to improve equity and access to care for Ontarians as follows:

- Uphold the Canada Health Act and the fundamental principle that care be provided to all Canadians based on need, not wealth. Stop private clinics that are charging patients for health care services that are already paid through public taxes. Capacity must be rebuilt in the public non-profit health system across the continuum of care from public hospitals to long-term care homes and home care.
- Federal funding for health care should be increased to ensure the federal government's role as steward of the Canada Health Act. Premiers from across Canada have called for the federal government to restore its share of funding to 25 per cent of public health care costs. The Ontario Health Coalition supports this call.
- Create a national pharmacare program to expand universal, comprehensive coverage to all Canadians for needed medications.
- Create a new program that would apply the principles of public medicare to public non-profit home and continuing care.

The coalition has compiled a large body of evidence showing that, as public hospitals are cut and moved to private clinics, patients are suffering as a result of unlawful extra-billing and user fees in private clinics. These clinics pose a serious threat to access to public health care for Canadians.

The Coalition also expressed deep concern about the ill-defined focus by politicians on “health transformation”. This media messaging has been co-opted as cover for cuts and privatization. Ontario has already undergone a seismic shift in health care. More hospital beds and services have been cut in our province than anywhere else in Canada. But this “transformation” has resulted in thousands of patients offloaded from public hospitals – and therefore out from under the protection of the Canada Health Act -- with increasingly complex health issues. Virtually every service cut from hospitals is subject to greater inequities, new user fees, extra-billing, privatization, and longer travelling distances for patients. The right to public health care without financial burden for the sick and the elderly has been gravely compromised, public hospitals have been stretched beyond safety, and rural services have been gutted. The lesson from Ontario is that better health care does not result when pieces of the health care system are pitted against each other in a competition for resources. The coalition is calling for a continuum of care – within the public non-profit health care system -- to cover population need at different stages of illness and recovery and aging, and the planning and resources to support these.

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