

Letters to the editor

Hospital CEO Does Chatham Kent Community a Disservice

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Sir:

Colin Patey, CEO of the Chatham-Kent Health Alliance, does this community a disservice when he advocates for private, for-profit health care.

In truth, there is much to be proud of in our public system.

Canadians are living longer than we were just 10 years ago. Every decade of Public Medicare has brought with it gains in lifespan for Canadians. We have reduced the incidence of heart attacks among Canadians, and those who do have heart attacks are living longer.

We have seen a decrease in stroke rates and an increase in cancer survival rates. In fact, we lead the world in cancer outcomes.

We have more than doubled the number of hip and knee surgeries that are being done each year. Ontario's health system has reduced wait times across the board for surgeries and other treatments in the last decade. All of this has been accomplished within the single-tier public health care system.

Mr. Patey, who was previously the CEO of a multinational private for-profit hospital corporation, is quoted as opposing the high status of Public Medicare in Canada. With a whiff of contempt he urges Canadian's to "get over" their view that public health care is sacrosanct. He advocates the creation of a market for-profit privatization of the sort his former company sells.

His contempt is misplaced.

Mr. Patey's numbers are also inaccurate. In fact, health care spending has been shrinking, not growing, as a proportion of our provincial budget for more than a decade. By 2011 according to the Ministry of Finance, it was 42% of public spending, not 49%. This has been happening at a time when corporate tax cuts have taken billions out of the public coffers.

He is incorrect as well about how much Canada spends on health care: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the U.S. all spend more than we do. In fact, the industrialized world's most privatized health system -- the U.S. -- costs almost twice what we spend per person and has worse outcomes.

Mr. Patey apparently has selected a very limited smattering of one-sided statistics to support his case, none of which are related to non-profit or for-profit ownership of health care services. Missing from these statistics are all the key indicators in which Canada's -- and Ontario's -- health systems are doing well.

We agree with one of Mr. Patey's points. The cost of drugs is too high. But what Mr. Patey fails to note is that pharmaceuticals are dominated by some of the biggest private for-profit corporations in the world. The high -- and growing -- cost of drugs is a good reason to create a public pharmacare program that would control prices and provide improved equitable access; the opposite of more privatization.

Privatization would diminish access for the people of Chatham-Kent, not improve it. We did a study in 2008 in which we found that the vast majority of private clinics charge their patients for services that are

supposed to be covered through our tax-funded public health insurance (OHIP). Most of these for-profit clinics engaged in extra-billing and two-tier health care, charging the provincial public insurance plan and charging extra fees to patients on top.

This is how private clinics maximize their profit-margins. We found that private clinics took scarce specialists and health professionals out of local hospitals lengthening wait times for most while selling expensive care to the well-heeled. Many of the private clinics violate the Canada Health Act.

There is much we can do to improve our health system. For one, Chatham-Kent needs the two public hospitals in Chatham and Wallaceburg -- with comprehensive services -- to serve the local population with quality care close to home.

Ontario funds its hospitals the least well of any province in Canada and we are seeing the impacts of this in overcrowding. Ontario has fewer RNs to population than almost every province in Canada.

We need improved access to long-term care (nursing homes) and home care, covered by the public system. We need to stop the privatization of needed services like physiotherapy. More Ontarians have access to a nurse practitioner, community health centre or family doctor and progress on this front needs to be accelerated.

All of this requires proper funding and organization of the public health care system, not dismantling it by for-profit privatization.

As Canada's largest social program, Public Medicare provides millions of Canadians with access to health care as we age and experience illness. For good reason, the Canada Health Act has endured as a compelling symbol of Canadians' commitment to provide needed health care for each other on equal terms and conditions. It is one of our most cherished social achievements because we are proud of these values, and rightfully so.

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