Health care issues go beyond the hustings

That health care is playing such a large role in the election campaign is undoubtedly a good thing, but regardless of how the Nov. 27 vote turns out our sights now must be firmly set on the future.

For several years now physicians have warned of the deteriorating state of Canada's health care system. As the ones who know the system intimately and often have to struggle mightily to make it work for their patients, physicians are keenly aware of the system's shortcomings.

However, those shortcomings can be addressed through collaboration and the development of a real plan of action. The September meeting of Canada's first ministers, at which consensus was reached on levels of federal funding, can serve as an example of future cooperation between federal and provincial and territorial leaders.

Following the announcement of the first ministers' agreement, CMA President Peter Barrett expressed cautious optimism about the deal, noting: "We're better off today than we were yesterday, but we are also aware of the shortcomings of the deal." He went on to note that "the infusion of money will stabilize the health care system over the short term, but not sustain it for the long term." He also warned that the funding will not be restored until the next fiscal year.

Now is the time to develop that long-term plan and the CMA believes that the elements are in place to produce one. This strategy will have to cover the areas detailed in the CMA's plan for revitalizing health care, notably renewing the health care system, addressing the shortage of health care professionals (especially physicians) and building connectivity within the health care system to better manage and coordinate resources.

Canadians believe that solutions can be found to the challenges facing health care and they want their elected representatives to move beyond politics to action.

The work that continues to be done by the physicians and other health care professionals to develop a comprehensive plan for a sustainable Canadian health care system is a good starting point for whoever forms our next government on Nov. 27.

FIND OUT MORE!

The CMA took its call for a new health care plan to Canadians with newspaper ads during this election campaign. CMA members can learn more about health care and the election through the CMA Voter's Guide, which includes polling information, the health platforms of the 5 major political parties and much more. It is available online (www.cma.ca/election2000/index.htm) or by calling 800 682-6367.
Solutions for health care go beyond money

Though I have been retired from clinical practice for 10 years, many of today's health care delivery problems are not new. Too many physicians equate amount of health care to quality of health care.

At the undergraduate, graduate and continuing levels of education, more emphasis must be placed on the difference between doing something and doing something useful. Each proposed medical act must be preceded by this question: "Has it been shown that this is really likely to be useful?" Clinical trials and careful retrospective reviews can determine this. Many more are needed.

While it is always easier to expect somebody else to do something, I suspect that if physicians eliminated all the useless medical care we would not have to ask our political leaders for to seize more of the taxpayers' money to pay for it.

James Devitt, MD
Ottawa

All I hear from medical lobby groups is that we need to spend more money on health care in Canada. I think what we really need is more effective use of the current resources that we have. And as a taxpayer, I'm not prepared to pay more income tax unless I see evidence that more spending translates into improved health status of Canadians.

Joe Finkler, MD
Vancouver

I was truly discouraged by the list of resolutions approved at the recent CMA annual meeting. There is a "motherhood" tone to most and an absence of any statement of a substantive nature. The majority of democratic countries have integrated health care systems (public and private) that appear to function adequately. Why should Canada be the only democratic country lacking in such a plan? We should examine the health care systems in these other countries and present recommendations to government bodies to establish a properly functioning health care mechanism.

James McGoey, MD
Winnipeg

Elections are great for generating news clips and sound bites, but what health care really needs now is a plan. This plan must focus on the kind of experiences our patients should have with the health care system and how Canada's system can evolve to provide these positive experiences.

Canada's doctors realize this and are working hard to bring about a new reality in the delivery of health care. This work includes research and examination of various practice models, increased connectivity and study of ways to increase the physician supply. A good example of this collaborative work is the report of the Canadian Medical Forum Task Force I, which was released last year. This report helped convince governments and medical schools across the country to increase enrolment at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels as part of a long-term solution to the physician-shortage problem. The CMA was a key participant in the task force efforts, just as it has been with the work of Task Force II, which is examining various models of physician practice. The task force is currently finalizing its report and will hold a consensus conference next spring to discuss recommendations generated by the document.

Sustained investment and innovative thinking are the keys to reviving Canada's health care system. Over the final two weeks of the election campaign — and beyond — the CMA will be working to ensure that an informed debate takes place on how to rebuild the system based on what is right for the future, not on what was wrong in the past. I hope all CMA members, and indeed all Canadians, will help us.

— Dr. Peter Barrett, CMA President

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

CMA Interface wants to hear about the issues that affect you and your practice.

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Planning a full recovery for health care

With the economy moving along nicely and most Canadians confident that the current environment of prosperity will continue, candidates in this election are striving to present voters with their plans to cut taxes while ensuring adequate amounts are spent on social programs such as health care.

While each party has its own ideas on how to do that, the CMA wants to develop a plan to guide the health care system. Such a plan would incorporate guarantees of stable federal funding, for example, but would go further than dollars and cents.

“We all know what we want the health care system to do and we believe that together we can make it happen,” said CMA President Peter Barrett. “We want the health care system to perform to the kind of standards that people can take comfort and pride in once again.”

The seeds of this plan come from the recently released 10-point action plan (see sidebar), which includes a variety of measures aimed at bringing Canada’s health care system out of its state of malaise. However, the CMA is expanding the focus of this plan beyond funding issues.

“One thing is essential, but it is not the essence of health care,” Dr. Barrett said in discussing his vision of a planned health care system.

“With a growing economy, our public accounts moving into the black and widespread public support for real action, we need to turn our energies into planning the best way of rebuilding our health care system.”

In bringing this message to politicians on the election campaign, and Canadians from coast to coast, the CMA is stressing things like cooperation and collaboration between government, health care providers and the patients who depend on the health care system.

“Or ideas of the future of health care aren’t far-fetched and they are affordable,” added Dr. Barrett. “They need not cause political division and the CMA has concrete ideas about how to make them happen.”

What Canada’s health care system needs to survive:

- A national plan to address the shortage in the health care workforce
- A national technology fund to address the long delays in getting diagnostic treatment, which will focus on improving and updating equipment such as CT scanners and MRIs
- Predictable, long-term and sustainable funding basis to ensure quality health care
- Diagnostic tests that are done within days, not months
- A connected system that allows medical files to move between health care providers efficiently and securely
- Surgical procedures that are scheduled promptly and happen on schedule

What do you think?

What elements should be covered in a plan for revitalizing Canada’s health care system?

‘Net offers a deluge of election material

While Internet voting in the general election isn’t quite a reality, many are claiming that this will be the first Canadian election shaped by the World Wide Web. With every major news outlet offering some kind of enhanced coverage on the Web, the campaign will certainly be reported as never before.

In addition to the extensive news coverage, the CMA has developed an informative election page (www.cma.ca/election2000/index.htm) as part of the overall association campaign strategy. Given the importance that all parties have placed on health care, the CMA wants to ensure members have all the information needed to get medical messages out to candidates during the campaign. Featuring regularly updated material and lists of key contacts, this special Web page will act as a hub for grassroots-physician involvement across the country. The site will provide the latest news from the campaign trail and let you hear who’s saying what about health care.

While the CMA page offers good information on the politics of the campaign, the Elections Canada (www.elections.ca) site can answer many basic questions about the election. Am I registered to vote? Where do I vote? How do I correct the information on my voter card? The site also includes a youth section that encourages younger Canadians to vote. The Elections Canada site is also where voters can get the definitive list of candidates following the close of nominations on Nov. 6.

Just as the media has embraced the Web to set up polls and discussion forums on the election, all the major federal parties (and most fringe ones) have Web sites that allow surfers to check party platforms, research candidates in specific ridings, access audio and video interviews, and much more.

— Steven Harry, editor CMA Interface
Where do the parties stand on health?

The Canadian Medical Association Journal asked all 5 major national parties running in the Nov. 27 election "What is your vision of medicare for the future?" The answers are below, with the exception of Bloc Québécois, which could not respond by press time.

NDP — The NDP’s vision goes beyond more money and beyond hospitals. While these are crucial, true reform requires a broader approach including drug- and community-based care and a plan to stop privatization of both care and research. We believe in encouraging healthy lifestyles. But we also believe poverty, housing and pollution are health issues not solved by massive tax cuts. By fighting causes of disease — including reversing tobacco tax cuts — we aim to prevent illness before it reaches health professionals.

Alliance — My vision for today is to see a government helping its citizens to achieve better health in addition to caring for those who are ill. In the future our aging society will increase the cost of health care to society. My vision for tomorrow is to arrive at an appropriate division of health care costs between generations, while maintaining our strong tradition of compassion for the sick and needy. Given the demographics of an aging population, more emphasis must be placed on preventative medicine, which places a degree of responsibility on individuals to ensure their wellness.

PC — My vision is one of a revitalized health care system, one with stable long term funding and one which provides Canadians coast to coast with a system that is people-oriented, empathetic and which offers a caring response to human needs. Health care in the new millennium must continue to rest on the twin pillars of access and quality. A PC government would work with the provinces to ensure that new technologies, such as information technologies and telehealth, form part of a modernized health system.

Liberals — The First Ministers have signed onto an agreement that is very clear on our vision of health care. Our vision, shared by the provinces and territories, is for quality, publicly-funded health care for Canadians — health care that is cost-effective and fair. Our vision includes timely access to an appropriate and integrated range of services for Canadian. Our vision means that health care is available to all Canadians, based on their needs, and not on their ability to pay. Our vision recognizes that we must report regularly to Canadian on how our health care system is performing. Our vision confirms all governments’ commitment to the principles of the Canada Health Act.

The answers are below, with the exception of Bloc Quebecois, which could not respond by press time.

CMA lobby work lauded

The CMA strives to make the views of members and their patients known to members of Parliament and senators, and to influence public policy wherever possible. Maurizio Bevilacqua, chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, recently praised this work in a column that appeared in the Hill Times: "... the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Nurses Association and other members of the health care community kept the focus on health care investments over a number of years, despite the fact that our government was in the process of steadily increasing its financial contribution in this key area. The message of the health care community was that, while spending increases were welcome, more had to be done. The work of these associations helped keep health care at the top of the public agenda."

It is encouraging that even though policy-makers don’t always appear to be listening, CMA messages do get through. These messages will continue because the CMA is not about to abandon its mission to provide leadership for physicians and to promote the highest standard of health and health care for Canadians, either on its own, or through strategic alliances with other organizations.