

Wednesday, April 15, 2009

Albertans don't want health-care services reduced: poll

EDMONTON — Alberta Friends of Medicare say the results of a recent poll they commissioned show Albertans don't want health-care services reduced or delisted. Executive director David Eggen said Premier Ed Stelmach's proposal to reduce health-care costs by ending coverage of some publicly insured medical procedures "flies in the face of what Albertans want," according to a poll of Albertans earlier this spring. "Albertans want their public-health system strengthened and not dismantled through delisting or privatization," Eggen said Wednesday. "The public system is the most important social program that Albertans own."

Premier Ed Stelmach said he hadn't had time to review the Friends of Medicare poll, but he is dedicated to building "efficiency (and) effectiveness in the health-care system." Every year, health-care funding increases in connection to new drugs, new technologies, and new treatments, Stelmach said. "Our goal here is to ensure that it's sustainable for the next generation and the generation after that....We're going to keep working with Albertans to find a balance."

As the province evaluates what services need to be delisted, Stelmach said, "The minister will work with health-care professionals, people in the knowledge. This is something that we clearly articulated a year ago when we campaigned, when we said we're going to work with health-care providers to build efficiency and effectiveness in health care to be sustained into the future."

Stelmach shied away from discussing whether one cost-cutting measure could be changing the way nurses, for example, are paid in Alberta.

"Seventy-five per cent of costs in the system is paying for services, for people that deliver those services. We want to be fair with everybody and structure it so we work with all of the unions, all of the health-care providers," he said. "Everyone plays such a critical role in the hospital system.... Everyone is important in delivering the services. So the minister is charged with the responsibility of working with everybody."

Health Minister Ron Liepert stepped back from the delisting controversy Wednesday saying he is not about to get out an axe and start chopping.

"I have never said we're going to delist. What I am suggesting is that we have an expert panel take a look at what is covered, but also what could be covered or what shouldn't be covered in the future. It's more of a review around what should public health-care cover and what it shouldn't."

Liepert says he has asked Alberta Health to come up with a proposal that sets out what types of officials should sit on the panel. He said he would not be opposed to having out-of-province members on the review committee.

But advocates of public health care say the government has long had a program to reduce the list of insured services and force Albertans to purchase private insurance to cover some procedures.

Eggen says the poll released Tuesday shows that Albertans highly value the health-care system and are willing to fight to defend it.

"The public in Alberta is well educated in the consequences of these actions and they haven't been afraid to voice their opinions before," he said.

The poll found that 56.2 per cent of Albertans believe the government has a hidden agenda to privatize the health care system and 67.9 per cent believe delisting services will mean they will have to pay more out of their own pockets for health care. Another 55.6 per cent said they believe some families won't be able to pay for services and will have to do without services.

Other highlights of the poll include:

- 75 per cent of Albertans agree that the solution to the problems in health care is improving the current public system, not replacing it with a two-tiered American system.
- 80 per cent oppose the plan to replace publicly operated nursing homes for seniors with assisted living accommodation.
- 70 per cent oppose turning more public health services over to private, for-profit operations.

The poll by Winnipeg's Viewpoints Research sampled 1,501 Albertans between Feb. 19 and March 8 and is considered accurate within plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, Eggen said.

Sample poll questions:

Q: To create a balance between maintaining universal health care and controlling skyrocketing costs, public medicare should cover the cost of basic, essential health services and people should buy private insurance to cover the cost of everything else.

Strongly agree: 3.6%

Agree: 29.7%

Disagree: 44.4%

Strongly disagree: 15.2%

Don't know / Refused: 7.0%

Q: Private for-profit clinics help those who can afford to pay. If private care increases, the public system will suffer and people like me will get worse care.

Strongly agree: 19.3%

Agree: 41.0%

Disagree: 30.6%

Strongly disagree: 4.9%

Don't know / Refused: 4.1%

dhenton@thejournal.canwest.com