



Liepert's Long Term Care Sleight of Hand Will Hurt Seniors

Health Minister Ron Liepert has a magic trick for Albertans. He is making long term care beds disappear in one hand, making something called "assisted living" beds appear in the other and then calling it "increased access to long term care" for seniors.

Other than in the world of magic, Liepert's logic (or his math) simply does not add up.

Most people in southern Alberta have heard of the Minister's plan to close Extendicare Lethbridge with its 120 long term care beds next summer, and replace it with a new building across town, also run by Extendicare Inc., which will have 140 Assisted Living beds, rather than full-service long term care beds.

Liepert justifies the downgrade by saying it will offer greater choice to seniors and allow for accommodation better suited to their needs. In fact, he is reluctant to admit it is a downgrade at all, suggesting most of the seniors in Extendicare should not be there. His Superboard's Vice President for Seniors Health and Living Options, Donna Stelmachovich (former health region seniors care director), has suggested that only a few of the current residents will find the level of medical care insufficient.

So, it seems part of the Minister's plan is to

make sure the bulk of the 120 seniors currently in Extendicare miraculously get better in the coming months. I sure would like to know how he plans on pulling off that particular part of his magic trick.



In magic, often the secret to a trick is that the magician works through misdirection – guiding your attention to another object while completing his or her sleight of hand.

Liepert is attempting to misdirect your attention by getting you to focus on the shiny new assisted living beds being built. In doing so, he is hoping you will miss his real plans.

First, he is neglecting to inform Albertans that assisted living beds are not full-service long term care beds. Assisted living beds do not

fall under the Alberta Health Act, and they do not come with the same level of medical care as nursing homes. They are designed for healthier patients, which means they provide fewer staff and address only basic services such as meals. Transferring a nursing home patient to an assisted living facility automatically means a downgrade in the quality of their care. To suggest anything else is pure hocus pocus.

Building a new assisted living facility is a good idea. Given that there is currently a long term care waiting list of more than 1100 seniors in Alberta, more beds of any level of care is desperately needed. But why close the Extendicare Lethbridge nursing home? If the Minister was truly concerned about expanding the number of spaces available to seniors, he would keep both facilities open.

It is at this point that Liepert's sleight of hand becomes deception. By closing a facility regulated under the Alberta Health Act and opening a new facility governed, in fact, not by Alberta Health but by Alberta Seniors and Community Supports, the Minister is removing the health care safeguards to the seniors in that facility.



The new arrangement is a boon for Extendicare Inc. The Health Act requires they provide a variety of services to patients in

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We are pleased to introduce the first issue of the FOM Guardian. We intend to use this paper as another means to inform Friends of Medicare members and the public about what is happening in the public health system and our efforts to advocate for a strengthened public system.

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-  Health Minister: Enforce the Law, that's your job
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Guardian

Strengthening and Expanding Public Health Care

Friends of Medicare is a coalition of individuals, social justice groups, unions, churches and other organizations dedicated to the strengthening and support of public health care in the province of Alberta.

Friends of Medicare raises awareness and educates Albertans about the benefits of public health care.

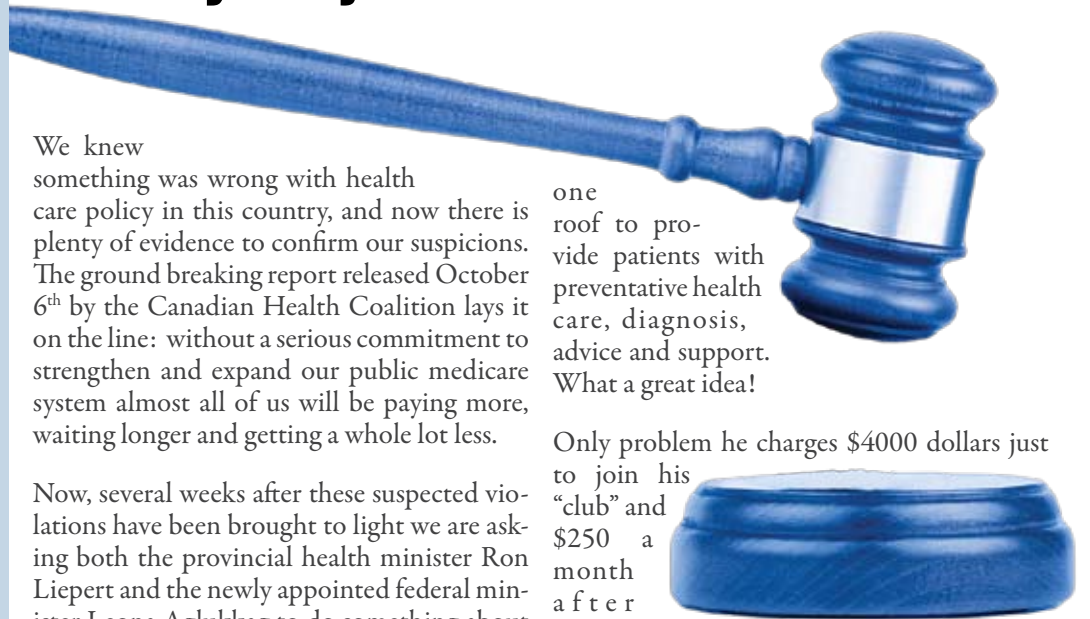
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Health Ministers: enforce the law, that's your job



We knew something was wrong with health care policy in this country, and now there is plenty of evidence to confirm our suspicions. The ground breaking report released October 6th by the Canadian Health Coalition lays it on the line: without a serious commitment to strengthen and expand our public medicare system almost all of us will be paying more, waiting longer and getting a whole lot less.

Now, several weeks after these suspected violations have been brought to light we are asking both the provincial health minister Ron Liepert and the newly appointed federal minister Leona Aglukkag to do something about it.

The findings of the study, *Eroding Public Medicare: Lessons and Consequences of For-Profit Health Care Across Canada* speak for themselves:

- 89 suspected violations of the Canada Health Act in five provinces where clinics told the researchers they would sell queue-jumping for fees or user charges that are unaffordable for most people.
- Many clinics sell unnecessary procedures and tests to those "customers" who can afford cash payments that range into the thousands of dollars.
- In regions with a high density of for-profit clinics there is evidence of higher wait times as money and staff is taken out of the public health system.
- Evidence of higher costs in profit seeking clinics

An example of this trend has arrived in the form of the for-profit Copeman health centre recently opened in Calgary. Certainly, Mr. Copeman has an interesting concept for a clinic. He puts doctors, nurses, nutritionists, fitness experts, psychologists and others all under

one roof to provide patients with preventative health care, diagnosis, advice and support. What a great idea!

Only problem he charges \$4000 dollars just to join his "club" and \$250 a month after that. In

addition, he will extra bill and make claims to Alberta Health insurance to boot. To give you an idea, each doctor in his Vancouver clinic grosses 1 to 1.5 million from the public purse, in addition to private fees.

So how does Mr. Copeman stack up to the first 3 principles of the Canada Health Act?

Comprehensive coverage of all medically required services. If Copeman is charging \$4000 dollars plus \$2000 dollars extra, is that in the spirit of comprehensive coverage?

Universal coverage for Canadians regardless of income. How many of you can pay Copeman's fees to walk through the door of his boutique clinic?

Health care must be accessible to all residents uninhibited by user fees. Obviously not at the Copeman Health Centre.

At a Friends of Medicare news conference, Mr. Don Copeman decided to show up, with his lawyer of course. He wanted to have a debate on the issue, right then and there, in front of at least 20 media and 50 angry protestors.

Fighting back tears, Copeman crashed the Friends of Medicare news conference and

told the cameras that he just wanted to set up a clinic to help his family, to make things better. He told the assembled media that he was a Friend of Medicare too, and had a sign in his clinic's window to that effect.

On that same day, it was revealed the doctors at this new clinic shut down their public practises in Calgary and told their patients if they want to keep seeing them, they could sign up for the to the Copeman clinic. In his Vancouver clinic patients without the money on the barrel are not served.

The Health Coalition study shoots a big hole into the mythology of "choice" and "taking pressure off the public system" that private medicine advocates like Copeman go on about. How many of us can "choose" to pay \$13,000 to \$20,000 dollars for knee surgery? Or \$250 a month just to "retain" the services of doctor? Private procedures and private insurance cost too much.

Why is there a demonstrable increase in wait

times where there are concentrations of for-profit clinics in operation? These clinics are siphoning scarce personnel from local hospitals and the public health care system.

Canadians know they are better off with public health care – those who seek to dismantle the system know they face an uphill battle to convince us otherwise. Public health care covers everyone, no one has to worry about whether they can afford the care they need. It's a tough sell for private clinics to convince us that we should pay more, a lot more, when most of us will just end up with less.

Medicare was established in the first place because for-profit health costs were spiralling out of control. It was, and still is, the most cost effective way to deliver health care. Canadians should be proud that we led the way to develop a public health model that is universally recognized as both efficient and socially responsible. Certainly we need to revise and expand our public health system to make it better.

However, both this report and good old fashioned common sense tells us that two-tier, for-profit health care is hardly the best way to go. For-profit clinics represent an increasing and serious threat to Albertans' health and pocketbook. Our provincial and federal governments should protect our public system, enforce the law and save us all money by standing up to for-profit health entrepreneurs.

Recent events in the world's financial sector are an obvious reminder that the absence of regulation and enforcement leads to instability and gross inefficiency. We cannot afford to play this game with public health. We fought hard for a medicare system where everyone is covered and no one goes broke paying for hospital bills. Let's get down to business of making medicare stronger, starting by enforcing the rules set out by provincial and federal law.

Big insurance gearing up for private health care

The two page advertising feature in the Alberta Motor Association magazine is looking for customers who want to spend more of their money on medical insurance. "Canadians now spend more of their own money on medical bills" is the ominous headline.

"The government can't afford to pay for it all..." the ad claims. It goes on to say "you know how quickly medical costs can add up – especially for those services not covered by your provincial health plan."

"These insurance companies want to expand their market, there's no doubt," says David Eggen, Friends of Medicare's executive director. "It's all part of convincing Canadians that our universal public health system won't work and we all have to spend far more on private health services."

The AMA ad comes from the Motor Association's insurance branch and from one of Canada's largest insurance corporations, Manulife Financial.

"This isn't the future Canadians want. We want our public health system improved and universal, not whittled away," Eggen says. "We must insist that our public health care has to cover all the services we need."

Another new insurance company, Acure Healthcare, is in the field offering to sell private medical insurance, including wait list insurance. "We pay taxes for our health services. It's the cheapest, most equitable way for all Canadians to get good care. More private health insurance just leads us down the road to American business-style health system that would cost us all a lot more," Eggen says. *continued on page 4...*



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BC Motor Association backs away from health insurance

In October the BC Automobile Association (BCAA) announced it scrapped its plans to offer controversial private medical access insurance to its members.

“Thousands of British Columbians took action to stand up for public health care,” said Joyce Jones, Co-Chair of the BC Health Coalition.

“Thousands of British Columbians recognized that two-tier for-

profit insurance only benefits the wealthy few and diminishes access to health care services for the rest of us.”

In a statement, the BCAA said that they were forced to cancel the insurance program after they were flooded with calls from members who were concerned the program violated the Canadian Health Act. Many cancelled their memberships outright, or threatened to do so unless the two-tier program was removed.

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a nursing home as part of the overall monthly fee paid by the senior. In an assisted living facility, if a senior wants additional care or services they have to pay extra. Extendicare gets more profit through fewer staff and more extra fees, and seniors pay more to get less. It is a stealth way to offload more costs to seniors and their families.

The real concern about Liepert’s magic act is that the disappearance of Extendicare Lethbridge is only the beginning. Before it was disbanded, the Chinook Region’s Business Plan stated they wanted to reduce the number of “traditional” continuing care beds (such as nursing homes) in the region from 748 to 179, replacing them

exclusively with these new “assisted living” beds. So it becomes not a matter of IF communities around Lethbridge will lose their nursing homes, but WHICH ONES.

And considering the person responsible for the Chinook Region plan, Donna Stelmachovich, is now the Vice-President for Seniors Health for the entire province, I fear we could see an replication of this shell game across the province.

Which should leave Alberta seniors and their families very, very worried about the quality of their care in the future.

Why Should You Join Friends of Medicare?

Our public health care system is the most valuable public asset we own together as a society. Public health care is there for everyone, and is part of what makes us a strong, caring and just nation. There will always be individuals who seek to privatize our health care system for financial gain, so it is up to us to stand up and fight for a strong public health system. Private-for-profit business interests are gaining influence in Alberta. It is the provincial government’s bias to expand private health care and diminish our public Medicare system. Public health care is more economical, more equitable, and certainly more efficient than private, for-profit medicine. Countries around the world look enviously at what Canada has achieved. It is up to the public to push for a stronger, expanded system for the 21st century.

David Eggen
Executive Director
Friends of Medicare

Friends of Medicare welcomes the support and participation of organizations and individuals in Alberta who are committed to preserving a single comprehensive public health care system accessible to all citizens. We encourage you to become a member by joining online @ www.friendsofmedicare.org or by returning this form with your membership fee.

\$25/year - Organizational

\$5/year - Limited income

\$10/year - Individual

Make a Donation:

As a volunteer organization, Friends of Medicare receives no funding from any government or political party. Your gift will help us to raise public awareness and educate Albertans on concerns related to health care in Alberta.

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