

Doctors Offer a New Prescription for Health Care

In 2006, a group of concerned doctors came together to counter the growing threat of health care privatization, forming a new organization called Canadian Doctors for Medicare (CDM). Since then, the organization's membership has grown to include doctors, health care educators and professionals, and medical students from across Canada. The Council of Canadians worked closely with CDM in August 2007 to speak out against the privatization agenda of then-Canadian Medical Association president Dr. Brian Day. Dr. Danielle Martin, a family physician with the Women's College Hospital in Toronto and one of CDM's founding members, spoke recently with *Canadian Perspectives* about the medical profession's ongoing fight to protect and enhance Canada's health care system.

What role do doctors play in the fight to protect public health care?

Doctors have a role to play in two ways: first, as part of our role in keeping people well we need to advocate for equity in health care. It is vital that we speak up for the vast majority of patients who cannot afford to pay for private insurance or out-of-pocket health care. The principle that access to care should be based on need and not ability to pay is central to our ability to serve our most vulnerable patients. Second, as front-line workers in the system, we must work towards solutions to the legitimate problems in our health care system: long wait times for some procedures, lack of coordination, and insufficient primary care, for instance.

As a doctor, how do you think the public health care system is working?

In many ways our system is excellent. Canadians have a long life expectancy and a low infant mortality rate. People who have a family physician or primary care team are highly satisfied with most aspects of their care; people with serious illness requiring hospitalization get rapid access to the care they need; our health outcomes compare favourably with those of other countries. Canadians who have had recent contact with the health care system tend to rate it more highly than those who have not, which suggests that



Dr. Danielle Martin

where there is dissatisfaction it seems to stem from high-profile media coverage of a few problems, not from an overall failure of the system to function.

The Canadian Medical Association has recently been led by doctors who support privatizing health care. What role has CDM had in giving doctors a different voice in the health care debate?

CDM has been a vital participant in the debate for two reasons: we have given voice to the vast majority of Canadian physicians who believe in medicare and want to see it preserved and improved rather than dismantled; and we have helped to reassure Canadian citizens that in spite of a few high-profile CMA leaders, doctors have not given up on medicare.

Supporters of public health care have often been labelled as "defenders of the status quo" and an unsustainable system. How would you respond to this?

I don't think anyone interested in health care today, in any country in the world, is interested in defending the status quo. All developed nations are spending more and more on health care, and although we can probably afford it, we need to ask ourselves if we are spending on the right things to maximize the health of the population. There are many aspects of the Canadian system that require reform. Our uptake of electronic health records in primary care, for instance, is among the lowest in the industrialized world. This leads to unnecessary test duplication, lack of care coordination and at times harmful medical error. Our public coverage for pharmaceuticals is patchy and poor compared to most other developed countries. In fact, Canada spends less publicly on health care than most other OECD nations. So there is much work to do.

How do you recommend that our members, as patients and users of the health care system, become more involved in ensuring we have a strong public system?

I think all citizens have a role to play in speaking out against inequity in health care when they see it. If you are charged for access to a service that is covered by your provincial health plan, report it. If you have an opportunity to participate in a program to improve health care in your local hospital, clinic or community program, take it. And joining organizations like the Council of Canadians and CDM (any citizen can join as a friend) helps us all continue the work we are doing.

To learn more about Canadian Doctors for Medicare, and to join as a friend, visit www.canadiandoctorsformedicare.ca.