

Americas / By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

In Canadian Health Care Some Are More Equal Than Others

Ring up Canada's Medisys Health Group in Montreal to inquire about a comprehensive medical exam and you will be told that the cost for such a service ranges between \$595 and \$1,050. You can pay by check, cash, debit or credit card but you may not use your government medical card to pay for your annual physical at the private clinic. That's because check-ups are considered "preventive" and are therefore not covered by Medicare in Quebec.

If this sounds like a two-tier health-care system, with some folks going to clinics that take Medicare and others going to private clinics where they pay their own way, that's because it is. Medisys reported a first quarter revenue increase of 43%, suggesting that while Canadians pledge allegiance to their traditional, single-tier government monopoly, their revealed preferences seem increasingly to be for choice.

A case in point is Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, Canada's most powerful and hard-line advocate of a monopoly government system and also a patient at Medisys. If the prime minister were living by the one-size-fits-all system he swears by, he, of course, could not go to Medisys since his Medicare card wouldn't cover his visit.

The prime minister's office insists that he never pays his own medical bills—this being something to brag about in Canada. For "anything not insured under Medicare he relies on his medical benefit provided to him as an employee of the government of Canada," his office told me.

Yet this hardly absolves Mr. Martin from the charge that he is a consumer operating on a different tier than most of the rest of Canada. After all, it is government privilege that lets him into Medi-

sys. Ordinary Canadians would either need to carry private insurance—only allowed for nonessential services—or pay out of their own pockets. As it turns out, even in egalitarian Canada, some are more equal than others.

Touted as Nirvana for decades by America's left, Canada's official monopoly, single-tier system—the only one in the world save Cuba—is breaking down badly. In comparing Canada to other OECD countries that provide publicly funded universal access, Vancouver's Fraser Institute finds that Canada seriously underperforms its peers. Survey authors Nadeem Esmail and Michael Walker found that while Canada ranked No. 1 in spending as a percentage of GDP in 2001, it ranked in the bottom half of the pile in per capita doctors, MRI machines and CAT scans.

The authors write that Canada's system "produces inferior age-adjusted access to physicians and technology, produces longer waiting times, is less successful in preventing deaths from preventable causes and costs more than any other systems that have comparable objectives." (Note that the U.S. and Mexico, neither of which have "comparable objectives," are not included in the study.)

What Messrs. Esmail and Walker find is that even if Canada wants to preserve publicly funded universal access there are better models to use than the one currently in place. A variety of Canadians seem to agree. Mr. Martin's chief political rival, Conservative Stephen Harper, believes that one way to address the scarcity crisis is to acknowledge and encourage the private-sector delivery of health care that would still be paid for by

Medicare. Some members of Mr. Martin's government have said the same.

But far more interesting than the political rhetoric is human action. As Medisys's success shows, there is pent up demand for health services, most of which are currently rationed. And provinces are widening the definition of "non-essential" services so as to alleviate some of their health-care burden.

Yet for most Canadians big problems remain. For serious illnesses, private medicine remains illegal so joining the queue at the public hospital is the only option,

Paul Martin, Canada's leading proponent of government health care, goes to a private clinic.

even if you have the money to pay. What burns a lot of Canadians, is that while the government forces the majority into government hospitals, it bends the rules where convenient for its own purposes.

Provincial workman's compensation boards may be among the biggest users of private clinics. Since provinces pay lost wages when an employee is injured, healing the patient quickly is not only the humane thing to do, it is also fiscally preferable. Incapacitated employees sent to private clinics receive fast, efficient and reliable therapy. In other words, if you're going to throw out your back, make sure you do it lifting files on Friday afternoon and not at home on Sunday.

Another preferred group of Canadians who are able to circumvent government-only regulations are the Royal Ca-

nadian Mounted Police, also big users of private clinics.

But for Canadians dissatisfied with their limited options there may be no greater insult to an injury than the knowledge that prison inmates in most provinces qualify for private clinic access. Jokes abound in British Columbia about the guy who got himself thrown in the slammer just so he could get his elbow fixed.

A lot of this could be solved in a Supreme Court case, slated for June 8, when appellants will argue that Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms grants the right to secure care and to buy insurance for serious illness, both of which are currently illegal.

The case involves two individuals, one who waited months in a government queue for a hip replacement and the other who is challenging the government prohibition on purchasing private health insurance. Writing in the Fraser Forum in October 2002, expert witness Dr. Edwin Coffey explained the argument: "The aim of the challenge is to invalidate two provisions in Quebec's health legislation that infringe upon freedom and choice and create government monopolies in health care and health insurance."

In constitutional law terms, at least one expert I spoke with thinks the case is rock solid. Yet given the ingrained attitudes of the court, the expectations of a favorable ruling are low. Perhaps the best that can be hoped is that the judges might fire a shot across the bow of the government. As the prime minister has demonstrated, the egalitarian dream is a fraud. As the Fraser Institute has shown, that dream has mostly caused hardship and suffering for Canadians.