

Health Care Queue-Jumping Scandal Rocks Canadian Province

By Thomas Cheplick

A health care scandal has erupted in the Canadian province of Alberta with allegations that Canadian politicians and other well-connected people are receiving preferred access to the health care system, skipping the waiting lines most citizens must endure.

Canadians have a nationalized health care system they pay for through income taxes, administered through a public authority in each province. The actual medical services in Canada are largely performed by private entities which are then reimbursed by the provincial government.

“Cookie Monster” Reveals System

The health system rests on the principle of equality, with no citizen being deemed “more equal” than their fellow citizens, and all must wait their turn to receive care. Yet the former CEO of Alberta Health Services, Dr. Stephen Duckett, revealed in a recent speech the principle of equality system relies on is a fraud.

“I’m told some of my predecessor CEOs had designated ‘go-to guys’ for discreet waiting list adjustments on request of [Members of the Legislative Assembly],” Duckett said in his remarks during a speech at the University of Toronto.

Duckett is known popularly in Canada as the “cookie monster” for being caught on camera nearly assaulting a Canadian reporter with a cookie, then refusing to answer reporters’ questions regarding operations at Alberta Health Services while he was CEO, because he was “eating a cookie”. Duckett was fired as CEO four days after the incident, which attracted nationwide attention, took place late last year.

Nothing to Lose From Truth

Because of the circumstances surrounding his firing as CEO and the national scorn poured on him during the controversy, observers maintain Duckett has nothing much to lose by telling the truth about the system at this point in his career. His revelations about the Canadian health care system do not surprise Michael Cannon, the Cato Institute’s director of health policy studies.

“The fact that Canadian politicians get better access to medical care is no more surprising, and no different, from Soviet apparatchiks living high on the hog while the Soviet people starved to death,” Cannon said.

Witnessed Preferential Treatment

Duckett maintains he tried to halt the practice of awarding preferential health care access to members of the Canadian elite in 2009. The result of Duckett’s prodding was a 2009 memo to top executives at Alberta Health Services forbidding preferential health care access to “prominent” Albertans. But Duckett claims the memo was largely ignored.

Dr. Raj Sherman, former Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health and Wellness in Canada, says Duckett is correct. He claims provincial health authorities in Canada routinely move elite Canadians to the top of doctors’ waiting lists.

“All of this seems to indicate that queue jumping has been happening for years in an organized and systemic fashion, a serious violation of the Canada Health Act warranting federal intervention,” Sherman said.

Sherman notes the Canadian government was well aware of what was happening.

“Absolutely, it happened,” said Sherman. “Government knew about it. In fact, they acknowledged it in an AHS memo and in the PowerPoint Mr. Fred Horne [a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta] presented to the caucus, and my front-line colleagues and I witnessed it firsthand.”

Systemic Problem

Cannon says when governments pursue socialized medicine by nationalizing health care, they do not end inequality but only change the rubric on who receives how much health care and when.

“Prices are the market’s communications system that helps consumers ration their own care in the way that’s best for them and their neighbors,” Cannon said. “When government takes over the economy—whether the commanding heights of the economy in Soviet Russia or just the health care sector in Canada and the United States—it abolishes the price system. Instead of rationing by price, government must therefore use other mechanisms, such as by political power and status.”

“Under universal health care, some patients are more equal than others,” Cannon said, alluding to the powerful pigs in George Orwell’s political fantasy novel *Animal Farm*.

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