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HEADLINE: The Bluffer's Guide; Everything you need to know for a dinner conversation about ... Public health care: Canada vs. United States

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BODY:

So, what's going on? Canada is denying health care to its elderly and sending them out on ice floes to die because they're too expensive to treat.

Seriously? No, but that's what some Americans are starting to believe after the scare tactics in TV ads.

Why on Earth would they spread such awful stories about Canada? Because they don't want our health care system in the United States.

Why not? Because such a system would disrupt the profits of the giant health insurance industry. So their lobbyists are launching television campaigns and meeting with lawmakers to get proposed health care reform law changed.

So it's all about greed? Not entirely. One worry is that in a government-run system, eventual cost-cutting will reduce the quality of care, without leaving people the choice of going to another provider. This argument has some logic behind it, looking at cuts to health care in Canada in the 1990s.

So Americans don't really want Canadian-style health care. That's not even what they're proposing. What President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party have put forward is a health reform package that has the following major points: preventing health insurance companies from denying coverage to people who have pre-existing medical conditions; forcing all Americans to be insured (which prevents them from gaming the system by only getting insurance after they get sick); saving money through preventive care and by digitizing medical files, among other things; allowing people to keep their employer's health insurance plans even after they lose their jobs; and creating a government-run insurance provider to compete with private providers. It's still a big step from that to Canadian-style single-payer plan, where it's illegal to have private insurance for health care covered under the public plan.

Well, it was illegal, anyway. That's true. Jacques Chaoulli got the Supreme Court of Canada to rule that preventing

a private insurance system violated the rights of patients to receive proper medical care without excessive delays.

So what does the industry have against the Obama plan? Conservative think tanks like the Cato Institute say a government-run health insurance system would compete unfairly with private health insurers because it would be funded by taxpayers. They agree that reforms are needed, but want ones that push for individual health insurance instead of employer-provided insurance, and that provide more tax incentives for people to get health insurance plans.

What do ordinary Americans think? A recent poll from CBS and the New York Times showed that 72 per cent of Americans support a public health care plan alongside the private health insurance system.

And doctors? Physicians for a National Health Program represents 14,000 health workers and supports universal health care.

That's a lot. What has the industry been saying about us to change their minds? More like what have we been saying about us. A group called Patients United Now uses Shona Holmes of Waterdown, Ont., in a television ad. Holmes remortgaged her home so she could spend \$100,000 to get a growth near her pituitary gland treated at the Mayo Clinic. The alternative would have been months on a waiting list in Canada.

Is this kind of thing common? Common enough that they've given it a name: medical tourism. But it actually happens in both directions. Americans come across to Canada mainly to save money (they still have to pay for care here, but in many cases it's less than what they'd pay at home without insurance), while Canadians with money to spare travel to the U.S. to avoid long waits for surgery.

Sounds like Canadian health care

isn't as good as in the U.S. Depends on how you look at it. Proponents of universal health care point to statistics like average life expectancy and infant mortality, which show Canada and other Western countries slightly ahead of the United States.

But that's because we spend more on health care than they do. Actually, it's the opposite. The United States spends almost twice per capita on health care than Canada, and more than any other Western country.

So how is the U.S. system better than ours? Well, they have more stuff. The U.S. has more expensive MRI and CT scanning machines, and they pay their doctors more, which has resulted in a brain drain from Canada to the U.S., and chronic labour shortages north of the border.

Is that why they say we can't choose our own doctor? It's a common claim, but nothing prevents Canadians from getting a second opinion or choosing their family doctor, assuming they can find one. A lack of general practitioners is a big problem here.

So they don't ration care here? Well, we certainly don't leave our seniors to die. But you could argue that long waiting lists for non-urgent treatment constitute a form of care rationing.

Open-ended discussion question: If you took the best of both worlds, what kind of health care system would you have?

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