

Canadian Health Coalition

MEDICARE WATCH

April 5, 2007

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Global TV (April 4, 2007)
Anaylsis of the Stephen Harper Announcement

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2. _____

Canadian Press (April 5, 2007)
Feds' promise on wait times ailing

Prime Minister Stephen Harper moved to deliver on one of his last unkept promises ahead of a looming election by announcing a pact with the provinces on medical wait times.

But the agreement covers only one procedure in each part of the country.

The prime minister told a medical conference on wait times that all provinces and territories have agreed to accept federal money for care guarantees, drawing on \$1.04 billion in new health funding provided in the March budget.

The guarantees won't take effect until 2010, assuming the Tories are re-elected.

The Conservative platform in the past election promised guarantees "to ensure that all Canadians receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times or can be treated in another jurisdiction."

The Conservatives are now promising Canadians they will get "timely access to health care in at least one of the following priority areas, either cancer care, hip and knee replacement, cardiac care, diagnostic imaging, cataract surgeries or primary care."

Yet Harper proclaimed he was fulfilling his campaign promise.

'DELIVERING'

"During the last federal election campaign, I and my party made a clear and unequivocal commitment, to Canadians," Harper told a health policy conference.

"We promised to sit down with provinces to develop patient wait-time guarantees and today I'm proud to announce we're delivering."

Each province is being allowed to guarantee the treatment of its choice, which leaves them free to choose areas where they're already meeting targets.

For example, Manitoba has chosen to guarantee access to radiation therapy within four weeks. It already provides the therapy within one week.

Quebec Health Minister Philippe Couillard said the feds are essentially endorsing actions the province has already taken to accelerate care following a Supreme Court of Canada decision last year.

Health policy experts welcomed the federal attention to wait times, but many said they are uncomfortable with the notion of care guarantees, saying long wait times are just the symptom of deeper problems that must be addressed.

Mike McBane of the Canadian Health Coalition said the government is not addressing the causes of the stress in medicare: "You'll notice there's no guarantee that Canadians can have access to a family physician."

3. _____

CTV News (April 4, 2007)

Critics say wait-times deal falls short of promise

Prime Minister Stephen Harper says he has fulfilled his pledge to establish medical wait-times guarantees across Canada, but critics say the deal falls short of his campaign promise.

"Today I am very pleased to announce that Minister Clement has succeeded in his mission," Harper said at an Ottawa wait-times conference.

"All 13 provinces and territories have now committed to providing the first patient wait-times guarantees."

The creation of a wait-times guarantee was one of the Conservatives' five priorities in the last election campaign.

But the deal does not come into effect until 2010, and provinces only have to promise timely treatment in one of several priority areas:

- Cancer care
- Hip and knee replacement
- Cardiac care
- Diagnostic imaging
- Cataract surgeries

The Conservatives had promised in the last federal election campaign that they would ensure guarantees in all of the above areas.

"If we focus on one part of the continuum, we're just shuffling chairs on the deck," said Dr. Chris Simpson of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society.

Meanwhile, the president of the Canadian Medical Association argued the more doctors and nurses will be needed to make the wait-times guarantees effective.

"The bottom line is, you can have all the benchmarks and all the standards, but unless you have the professionals in place to do the job, it won't be done," Dr. Colin McMillan told CTV's Mike Duffy Live.

Harper said the promise will be kept through two initiatives.

The first measure is a fund that will provide financial support to the provinces and territories to create their guarantees for one of the five areas.

"As a result, Nova Scotians, Manitobans and Albertans battling cancer will soon obtain more timely radiation treatment, Ontarians will face shorter waits for cataract surgery," Harper said.

In the federal budget released on March 19, \$612 million was set aside for the provinces and Ottawa to pay for the initiative and \$30 million was set aside for wait-times pilot projects.

The second initiative will focus on investing in health information and communication technologies through the Canada Health Infoway. In the March budget, \$40 million was set aside to fund Infoway.

"This independent, non-profit organization to which all 14 federal and provincial territorial governments belong -- that doesn't happen very often -- is leading the way towards full digitization of Canadians' health records and a national health information management system," Harper said.

The measure, he said, will help make electronic medical records available to doctors wherever and whenever they need it.

"This will have a profound impact on the efficiency of our healthcare system and that, in turn, will help the provinces and territories implement a comprehensive set of Patient Wait Times Guarantees," he said in a release.

Wednesday's announcement may be one more indication that a federal election is in the offing.

Health Minister Tony Clement had been expected to appear at the Ottawa conference, dubbed "Taming of the Queue," on his own, but news emerged that Harper would be showing up instead.

Harper's election campaign included five key promises, one of which was to establish wait-time guarantees for some medical procedures.

Under the proposal, patients who didn't receive treatment in a timely fashion would be sent to other jurisdictions for treatment, or would be treated at private clinics with the government paying the bill.

Harvey Voogd of the Alberta-based Friends of Medicare group told The Canadian Press the provinces would likely sign up for an area they have already been working to address.

"No government's going to walk away from a pot of money," Voogd said. "Nobody has signed on to a difficult wait time, all have signed up for wait times they're already beavering away at or successfully meeting.

But Voogd said the government's plan is mostly pre-election posturing.

A failure to fulfill the wait-times promise could give the Opposition ammunition against the Conservatives in an election.

With a report by CTV's Roger Smith in Ottawa

4. _____

CanWest News Service (April 5, 2007)
Harper unveils details of patient wait-time guarantees
By Andrew Mayeda

Prime Minister Stephen Harper yesterday addresses an Ottawa conference on hospital wait times, where he unveiled a funding agreement with the provinces.

OTTAWA - Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared victory on Wednesday in his effort to extract health-care wait-time guarantees from the provinces and territories, but medical experts and opposition critics declared the mission far from accomplished.

Implementing a wait-times guarantee for patients was one of the Conservatives' five priorities during the last election campaign.

But it has turned out to be a tough assignment for federal Health Minister Tony Clement, who has been negotiating for months with the 13 provinces and territories, which have jurisdiction over health-care.

Harper announced Wednesday all the provinces and territories have agreed to establish wait-times guarantees by 2010. "Today, I'm very pleased to announce that minister Clement has succeeded in his mission," Harper told a conference on wait times hosted by the Canadian Medical Association.

However, observers noted the agreement only guarantees timely access to health care in "at least one" of six priority areas: cancer care, hip and knee replacement, cardiac care, diagnostic imaging, cataract surgeries and primary care.

In their 2006 election platform, the Conservatives promised to establish "evidence-based" benchmarks for all of those areas, except primary care.

Health-care professionals reacted with cautious optimism.

Chris Simpson, a representative for the Canadian Cardiovascular Society, called the agreement a "significant step forward," but warned much work must be done before patients can be certain of how long they will wait for treatment.

"We are nowhere near the point where we can say 'mission accomplished.' This isn't a George Bush thing where we say this issue is done and we can move on. This is just the start."

Meanwhile, opposition critics accused Harper of watering down his original election promise.

"I actually laughed out loud, because it's the first time I've seen a politician make a public announcement that he was breaking a promise," said Liberal MP Bonnie Brown, the party's health critic. "To me this is just further proof that he is itching to have an election."

NDP health critic Penny Priddy said the Harper government has yet to demonstrate a long-term health-care vision for the country.

"Leave campaigning for the election, whenever that will be. What we need right now is a vision for health care. Wait times are a symptom of a system that isn't working."

Under the agreement, provinces can choose the area in which to offer a wait-times guarantee. Manitoba, for example, will offer guarantees on radiation therapy, while Saskatchewan will do so in cardiac care, Clement said Wednesday.

The government will use research-based benchmarks to determine how long a patient should reasonably be expected to wait, he said. If the patient cannot receive care during that time, he or she can seek treatment in another province through the public health-care system.

"What you're starting to see is a whole health-care network being created for health care guarantees which expands the impact of this truly nationwide," said Clement, who declared it a "good day for health care."

The agreement will be supported by about \$1.4 billion set aside for health care in last month's federal budget, including \$612 million for a patient wait-times guarantee trust that will dispense money to the provincial and territorial governments to help them meet their commitments.

The budget also allocated \$400 million to improve health-care efficiency through the use of information technology.

But some medical experts worry the agreement will create a patchwork system with varying levels of care across the country. "I'm a little concerned about the fact that we have individual projects across the country that are not necessarily comparable," said Tom McIntosh, director of health policy at the Canadian Policy Research Network.

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Canadian Union of Public Employees (April 4, 2007)

PRESS RELEASE

Harper's wait time plan guarantees - Election not far behind

OTTAWA, April 4 /CNW Telbec/ - Today's wait time guarantee announcement is designed as part of Stephen Harper's pre-election strategy," said Paul Moist national president of Canada's largest union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees - CUPE. "Canadians have a reasonable expectation to receive health care in a timely manner. They also have a reasonable expectation that this happen by working with our public health care system - not against it," he added.

Dr. Brian Postl's final report as the federal advisor on wait times was quietly released almost a year ago, on Friday June 30, 2006. "This report contains many key recommendations that favour strengthening the public system over the false quick fix of wait time guarantees. Prime Minister Harper must drop the political games around wait times and commit to an integrated team approach to providing health care services to Canadians," said Moist.

Dr. Postl recognized the need for a health human resource strategy and team based care as well as wait time coordinators and patient advocates.

"Setting false expectations as part of a pre-election strategy is morally bankrupt and cheats Canadian society as a whole. We have had commissions and reports - both the Romonow and more recently the Postl reports have been ignored. Prime Minister Harper has missed a golden opportunity to do the right thing," concluded Moist.

CUPE represents over 170,000 health care workers across Canada – from support services to surgery.

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Canadian Press (April 4, 2007)

Harper expected to claim success on medical wait-time guarantees

By Dennis Bueckert

OTTAWA -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper is scheduled to address a conference on wait times Wednesday, and bets are that he will announce the fulfilment of his election promise on medical wait-time guarantees.

Organizers of the Taming of the Queue conference, an annual meeting in Ottawa on wait times, had expected an appearance by Health Minister Tony Clement but the surprise visit by Harper suggests political news in the offing.

Care guarantees were one of the five priority election promises of the Conservatives in the 2006 election - the idea was that patients unable to get timely medical care would be sent to another jurisdiction or allowed to get treatment in private clinics at public expense.

Failure to deliver on the high-profile promise would provide a target for opposition parties in a possible election. But provinces initially refused to buy into the plan on which they had not been consulted.

The March budget provided \$612 million for provinces and Ottawa to fulfil a somewhat reduced promise: a care guarantee in one treatment area rather than all five priority areas - cancer, heart, diagnostic imaging, joint replacements and sight restoration - initially outlined.

To get its share, a province can promise to provide a guarantee in the area of its choice, and do so in the manner of its choosing.

“No government’s going to walk away from a pot of money,” said Harvey Voogd of Alberta-based Friends of Medicare, suggesting that provinces could merely continue to do what they were doing anyway.

“Nobody has signed on to a difficult wait time, all have signed up for wait times they’re already beavering away at or successfully meeting.

“Anybody who follows this stuff can see what the federal government is doing is not a well thought out wait-time plan but is covering their political backside for any federal election.”

Tom McIntosh, research director at the Canadian Policy Research Networks, said there is little enthusiasm about care guarantees at the provincial level.

“Many people have been deeply ambivalent on the idea of a care guarantee unless it’s really properly designed and based on some really strong evidence. What happens to those things that are deemed not to be a priority? Do we sacrifice those to meet our priorities?”

“I think there’s a feeling that the federal government is trying to push provinces in a way that may not necessarily result in either the reduction of wait times or good policy; that there could be unintended consequences that haven’t been thought out.

“At the same time they don’t want to leave the money on the table.”

Meanwhile, the federal and provincial governments have quietly abandoned one of the key elements of the 2003 first ministers’ health accord, which was the requirement for accountability in the spending of billions of federal health dollars.

Jeanne Besner, interim chair of the Health Council of Canada, reported earlier this year that it is impossible to know where the federal money is going because provinces have not provided the necessary data.

“We are unable to say where the provinces and territories are investing funds from the federal health-care agreements because no financial breakdowns are provided,” she said in her 2007 report.

The 2003 accord required that provinces provide comparable health indicators but they have not done so, and the federal-provincial committee overseeing the work has been disbanded, Besner said.

Consequently there is no pan-Canadian evidence that waiting lists are being shortened.

Toronto Star (April 5, 2007)

PM trumpets wait-time win

But opposition says deal with the provinces amounts to a broken 2006 Conservative campaign promise, and medical professionals say problems with timely care aren't solved

By Allan Woods, Ottawa Bureau

OTTAWA—The Conservative government has declared victory with the creation of a countrywide patient wait-time guarantee, even though it will cost \$1 billion, will apply only to some surgeries and may not kick in until 2010 in some places.

Still, Prime Minister Stephen Harper says he has now delivered on each of his five election priorities made during the 2006 campaign, although the Liberals and New Democrats cast it as another broken promise.

The wait-time agreements with the provinces require them to choose at least one of six priority surgeries (cancer care, hip and knee replacements, cardiac care, diagnostic imaging, cataract surgeries or primary care) and ensure that patients get care in that area within a medically acceptable period of time. Provinces must have this in place by 2010.

Ontario announced last week that it will guarantee cataract surgeries for patients within six months starting in 2009.

The \$1-billion budget cheque that sealed the deal with the provinces and territories goes against Harper's election vow that Ottawa would shoulder none of the financial load for the initiative.

But it appears to be a price the Tories are willing to pay to try to fulfill a campaign commitment.

Harper's declaration of victory fell a bit flat with his audience of medical professionals.

"We are nowhere near the point where we can say `mission accomplished,'" said Dr. Chris Simpson, of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society. Health Minister Tony Clement tried to put a good spin on the announcement.

"Canadians know that politicians who say they can fix the health-care system tomorrow are snake-oil salesmen. They know that," he told reporters.

"They know that this is a sophisticated area where, quite frankly, politicians who promise too much and force the issue might do more harm than good in the health-care system."

In the election campaign, Harper said a Tory government would establish a patient guarantee "by the end of 2006."

He also promised to ensure "all Canadians" receive essential treatments in a timely manner.

Harper told his audience that Clement has been working on the wait-times guarantee since being sworn into office. "None of my ministers had a tougher assignment. Today, I'm pleased to announce that Minister Clement has succeeded in his mission."

In Toronto last night, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion criticized Harper for breaking an election pledge.

"Mr. Harper promised wait-time guarantees for five kinds of surgery. Today, Mr. Harper declared a guarantee for only one of those ... categories and called it a victory," he said. "We need a wait-time guarantee for Conservative wait-time promises."

The Liberals made essentially the same health-care campaign promise as the Conservatives, except they were willing to pay for patients and a family member to be relocated for timely medical treatment.

Both the Tories' announcement of a fulfilled promise, and the opposition stand that the government's wait-times solution is actually a broken promise, are feeding speculation that an election is coming soon.

The federal money – \$612 million for a trust fund provinces can tap into, plus \$400 million to help digitize health records – "allowed the logjam to be broken" between Ottawa and the provinces, Clement said.

With the money committed, the agreements were signed. The ink was still wet when the public announcements began.

However, the declaration of victory yesterday was a rehash of announcements in Toronto and six other provincial capitals in the last several days.

Clement and Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman announced on March 27 the province would receive \$205.4 million to ensure cataract surgeries within six months, either at the patient's local hospital or in another province.

"I'm only interested in one thing, which is getting as much support as we can from the government of Canada to enhance health care for the people of Ontario," Smitherman said, adding that Clement received a clear message from the provinces on the need for more money.

Ontario has spent about \$95-million since 2004 to boost the number of cataract surgeries performed, resulting in a 41-per cent reduction in wait times, officials said.

with files from Rob Ferguson

7. _____

Globe and Mail (April 5, 2007)

Critics blast PM's health targets as 'soft'

By Daniel Leblanc, Lisa Priest and Gloria Galloway

OTTAWA, TORONTO — Prime Minister Stephen Harper unveiled a cross-Canada waiting-times guarantee for health care yesterday to a chorus of criticism that the government is not living up to a 2005 campaign promise.

In a speech in Ottawa, he hailed the agreement by all provinces and territories to provide swift access to at least one medical service by 2010, or pay for its delivery elsewhere.

"Patient wait times in Canada have reversed direction and they certainly are no longer getting longer," Mr. Harper said. "All 13 provinces and territories have now committed to providing the first patient wait-times guarantees."

To gain access to a \$600-million waiting-times trust, provinces have to pledge action on one of the following areas: cancer care, hip and knee replacement, cardiac care, diagnostic imaging or cataract surgery.

The provinces and territories have all made their choices, but the Harper government would not reveal details yesterday of its deals with Alberta, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island.

In addition, critics are raising questions about the value of some of the deals that have been made public. For example, some provinces have chosen areas where they're already meeting targets, rather than the areas in which they face real difficulty.

Ontario is promising that by 2009, patients who cannot obtain cataract surgery within 182 days will be given the opportunity to receive treatment outside the province. However, the current average wait for cataract surgery in Ontario is 183 days -- just one day longer than the target.

Federal Health Minister Tony Clement presented Quebec as a leader with its promises in the areas of hip surgery, knee replacements and cataracts, but the province did not include cardiac or cancer care in its agreement.

Three provinces have agreed to establish waiting-times guarantees for radiation therapy. Manitoba says that by 2010, it will guarantee cancer patients start radiation within four weeks. Yet it already begins such treatment within one week, so it will have to take no special action to qualify for federal money.

New Brunswick and Nova Scotia said they will provide that same treatment in eight weeks. Yet radiation oncologists recommend a maximum wait of two weeks between diagnosis and the start of treatment.

"Two weeks is appropriate. . . . I don't think people would be willing to wait eight weeks," Tom Pickles, president of the Canadian Association of Radiation Oncology, said in an interview. "My impression is they picked a soft target. . . . It does not help patients right now and it doesn't help patients in three years."

Nova Scotia Health Minister Chris d'Entremont said the eight-week guarantee for radiation treatment was selected because that's how long patients now wait in his province.

If action wasn't taken, he said, the wait could have been substantially longer by 2010, given the larger number of cancer patients coming through the system.

"We know it would be substantially more than eight weeks if we didn't do anything," Mr. d'Entremont said, adding he hopes to actually provide radiation treatment within four weeks.

The NDP said the announcement falls short of the Conservative campaign promise that "patient wait-time reduction targets for priority procedures identified by provinces are established by the end of 2006."

"The government isn't keeping its promise," New Democratic MP Penny Priddy said. "[This announcement] was about getting the Prime Minister in front of a microphone as his party prepares to force a spring election."

Liberal MP Bonnie Brown said the government is trying to hide the fact that its promise has been an "utter failure."

"It's another proof that [Mr. Harper] is itching to have an election," she said.

Mr. Clement said the announcement represents a "sea change" in Canada's health-care system.

"We're meeting the expectations of Canadians. Canadians know that politicians who say they can fix the health-care system tomorrow are snake-oil salesmen," Mr. Clement said.

He said that while provinces only had to sign on in one area of medical services, the step-by-step improvement in services will boost the overall delivery of health care across Canada.

CROSS-COUNTRY CHECK-UP

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said yesterday that all provinces and territories are enacting waiting-times guarantees under which patients have access to a specific medical service in a set time frame at home, or obtain it elsewhere. The provinces and territories only had to select one service to get access to \$600-million in new federal funding. Here is what some provinces are guaranteeing to their residents:

Province	Clinical area	Timeframe	PWTG*Implementa tion	PWTG* trust fund
Sask.	Coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery	Common waiting-times benchmarks, meaning the typical time recommended by medical specialists	Jan. 1, 2010 or sooner	\$24.8-M over three years
Man.	Radiation therapy	4 weeks	Spring, 2008	\$27.9-M over three years
Ont.	Cataract surgery	26 weeks	Jan. 1, 2009	\$205.4-M over three years
Que.	Cataract surgery Joint replacements	None specified in the province's Bill 33. White paper indicated timeframe would be in line with recommendations of medical specialists.	Not specified in Bill 33. Hospitals have until December, 2008, to introduce a central mechanism to manage access to services.	\$126.6-M over three years
Que.	Tertiary cardiology	Not Specified	Already in place throughout the province	\$126.6-M over three years
Que.	Radiation oncology	8 weeks	Already in place throughout the province	\$126.6-M over three years
N.S.	Cancer radiation therapy	8 weeks	2010	\$24.2-M over three years
N.B.	Cancer radiation therapy	8 weeks	2010	\$21.3-M over three years
Nfld.	CABG	Common waiting-times benchmarks	March, 2010	\$24.2-M over three years

(PWTG) *Patient waiting-times guarantee, SOURCE: HEALTH CANADA