

The Edmonton Journal (July 20, 2006)
Do wait guarantees have side-effects?

A health-care guarantee is an attractive and comforting idea, one that appeals to many Canadians and is a top priority of the Harper government.

It seems to get at the heart of what's plaguing Canada's health system: the long waits some Canadians face for necessary treatment. Yet most provincial governments, including Alberta's, have shied away from the idea of a care guarantee. They have good reason to do so.

A government care guarantee is a formal commitment that all patients will get certain kinds of medical care within a set time, one way or another. If patients have to be shipped off to another province or even out of the country to avoid long waits, that's what must happen. If governments fail to deliver, patients might be able to sue them.

But the federal government, which is proposing this guarantee, has no responsibility under Canada's constitution for delivering health care. It's the provincial governments that will be on the hook for Ottawa's promises.

Nor will enacting a health-care guarantee, in itself, shorten one waiting list. Only more health-care funding does that, and more efficient health systems, and more doctors and hospital staff.

A care guarantee is like a balanced budget act. Passing the act, or the guarantee, is the easy part. The real work is running a government that doesn't fall into deficit, or running a health system with the resources to meet patients' needs in a timely way.

Health Minister Tony Clement appears prepared to negotiate with the provinces about the care guarantee idea. Perhaps he'll offer more money from Ottawa to bolster provincial health systems, so they can honour the guarantee of fast service.

Cautious provinces, especially those less economically healthy than Alberta, may want more than that. They may ask for an ongoing -- guaranteed, in fact -- federal financial commitment to pick up the tab for the no-waiting health service the Harper government proposes.

Then Ottawa may find itself caught by its pledge to pick up a potentially very expensive bill, without having direct control of the levers of health care that might reduce wait times.

Like a balanced budget bill, a health-care guarantee is meant to force governments to do the right thing.

It assumes we can't trust them to do it on their own.

The problem with both ideas is they're rigid.

If a government can never have a budget deficit, then when economic disaster hits it must either raise taxes or fire staff; the deficit option is off the table.

If a provincial government must always, without fail, provide hip and knee replacements within 26 weeks, what will it do when it's short of money?

Maybe it will raise taxes.

More likely, it will start squeezing the medical care being provided for the long list of conditions not covered by the guarantee -- things like mental health, diabetes or lung diseases.

A health-care guarantee will ensure fast treatment for about five conditions only. Other medical procedures will have to fight for the remaining funding.

Waiting lists are the wiggle room in our public health system. They are always frustrating and stressful.

Sometimes they're not appropriate at all: cancer patients with fast-growing tumours need fast treatment, regardless of the cost to government.

But in other cases, a slightly longer wait doesn't endanger life.

The provinces have proposed wait-time benchmarks, which are goals to shoot for, but not legally guaranteed. A list of benchmarks has already been set -- a maximum 26 weeks for a joint replacements, for instance -- and provinces are supposed to be working toward meeting them.

Benchmarks may not be as flashy as guarantees, but they're more realistic.

Provincial politicians aren't stupid. They know very well how important prompt health treatment is to their citizens, and how growing wait lists can feed a demand from the wealthy for private health alternatives. They deserve a chance to make the benchmarks work.

The Alberta government has already made a good start by regularly reporting wait-time data on its Alberta Health website. It's also doing something even more important: looking for streamlined ways of handling patients that can dramatically reduce wait times.

We should be proud of what's happening in this province.

Reforming and adequately funding the health system is the heart of the matter. Care guarantees are not.