

# Romanow Receives Prestigious Award in Washington

Roy J. Romanow's PAHO Award Acceptance Speech  
September 22, 2003

I am both humbled and honoured that the Pan-American Health Organization has seen fit to confer upon me this award, one that I quite frankly believe has been earned by the people of Canada.

This is no false humility on my part; if my Commission's final report has come to be recognized as a success, it is not the result of any grand scheme or deliberate strategy...

Rather, it is because the report is faithful to what Canadians themselves said they wanted expressed in the policies and programs that define their health care system.

It wasn't always easy; consensus on how and where to begin the process of transforming our health care system, to improve its effectiveness and to place it on a more sustainable footing for the future, often seemed elusive.

As the Ministers and officials gathered here today know better than most, for any given problem in public policy, there are an endless array of potential solutions, each with their own compelling logic and intellectual foundation...

But what was never, ever in doubt was the commitment of the overwhelming majority of Canadians to the core principles at the heart of our health care system.

Principles that express shared values and that transcend any particular ideological affinity.

Principles of fairness, of equity, of mutual respect and of collective responsibility for improving human health.

Indeed, the very same principles that have defined, nurtured and that I know will continue to sustain, PAHO itself.

As you reflect on the lessons learned in regard to the evolution of primary health care in the Americas since the 1978 Alma-Ata Conference...

As you discuss how best to realize the vision that inspired its authors more than a quarter-century ago...

And as you contemplate how to move forward- both within your respective jurisdictions and together as partners in this geographic space we share- there are two lessons from my Commission's work that I believe to be germane to your deliberations.

The first lesson is that values matter. Initiatives and policies inconsistent with the values of those they are intended to benefit, that do not resonate with citizens, will ultimately fail. And make no mistake: the choices we make in relation to health care or to primary care are ultimately choices between competing values.

*continued ...*

The second lesson is that respect matters. Actively engaging citizens in shaping the policies and programs that will affect them is critical to their success. Given an opportunity to contribute, and given access to the hard facts, to the trade-offs and choices, people can be trusted to make the right and responsible decision. I have no doubt whatsoever on this point and I hold this to be a universal truth, equally relevant to all nations and peoples, regardless of their level of development, wealth or demographic realities.

Let me close by saying that what made the Commission a particularly meaningful experience for me was my deep personal belief that Canada's program of Medicare is the single greatest symbol of our uniqueness as Canadians.

What makes Medicare the quintessential Canadian program is that it is the convergence point where so many of our values come together. That's why we called the Commission's report Building on Values.

Medicare demonstrates that as community we can accomplish so much more than we could ever dream of doing as individuals.

It underscores our belief that citizenship confers upon us rights that are based on the strength of our need and not the size of our wallet.

And it highlights one of the new realities of a young century - that economic growth cannot advance at the expense of social cohesion, or social cohesion at the expense of economic growth - the two have to go hand-in-hand.

I was honoured to help prepare a road map for a collective journey by Canadians - a journey to reform and renew our health care system. And I will continue to act as an advocate in this regard.

Thank you.

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