

Québec escapes health sanctions

Ottawa fails to exact penalties for queue-jumping, extra billing and ignoring requests for information

By Gloria Galloway, with a report from Rhéal Séguin in Québec

OTTAWA — A federal report says there was queue-jumping and extra-billing at private clinics in Québec last year but the province was not penalized along with others that violated rules of Canada's public health system.

In fact, the 2006-2007 annual report on the Canada Health Act indicates that Québec continued its long-standing practice of failing to give Ottawa any of the information requested about its insured health services.

The act allows the federal government to deduct money from provincial transfer payments in cases where provinces permit banned practices such as user fees for treatment.

British Columbia was fined \$114,850 last year for extra billing that occurred at surgical clinics three years ago. Nova Scotia was hit with a \$9,460 penalty, according to the report.

Despite what the report describes as "concerns about queue-jumping and charges to insured persons at private surgical clinics in Québec," there were no sanctions taken against that province. Nor has any federal government, going back more than a decade, cut Québec's transfer payments despite the province's involvement with private care.

When asked about the apparent double standard, a spokeswoman for federal Health Minister Tony Clement said: "Health Canada officials work closely with provincial and territorial health ministries to resolve any outstanding compliance issues. Deductions to provincial CHT payments are only applied when all options to resolve issues have been exhausted."

Québec argues that health care lies within provincial jurisdiction and it is the province's responsibility to inform its citizens about the state of the health system.

Isabelle Merizzi, a spokeswoman for Québec's Health Ministry, said Québec has always respected the principles outlined in the Canadian Health Act and that sharing information with Ottawa was not one of them.

"We don't see the interest in giving the information to the federal government. Our duty is to inform Québeckers," she said.

But Liberal health critic Robert Thibault said that, while the delivery of health care is the responsibility of the province, "compliance with the act is also their responsibility if they are going to receive money from the federal system."

All provinces should be treated the same under the act, Mr. Thibault said. "If you start choosing when you do enforcement and when you don't," he said, "I think you are at great risk."

Michael McBane, national co-ordinator of the Canadian Health Coalition, said Québec routinely turns a blind eye to violations of the Canada Health Act.

By refusing to mete out penalties, "the federal government is making political trade-offs at the expense of our national standards."

Mr. McBane fears that allowing Québec to violate the act while other provinces are fined will eventually erode the public health system in Canada.

"If Québec gets away with flouting the Canada Health Act, how can you enforce it in British Columbia? We either have national standards or we don't," he said.

Québec is the only province to provide no data for the report on the Canada Health Act.

But three other provinces - Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta - also failed to hand over all of the information requested. Alberta says the data are on its government website.

In 2002, the federal Auditor-General found significant shortcomings in the collection of health information and said provincial collaboration is needed to ensure compliance with the Canada Health Act. Linda Silas, of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, said her organization will be asking the auditor to take another look at the situation.