

Standing up for Medicare



In the lead-up to the provincial election, we released RNAO's platform and urged nurses across the province to ask politicians on the campaign trail about their plans to

reduce poverty, clean-up the environment, protect and strengthen Medicare, and support nurses. We stressed how important it is to ensure our new government protects Ontario's health-care system from attacks by for-profit advocates who prey on the vulnerabilities of people confronted with illness.

Sadly, we have seen two troubling examples of such attacks in recent months.

The first one came weeks before candidates officially began campaigning. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) unveiled its plan to 'modernize' Medicare, advocating that physicians be allowed to practice simultaneously in both the public and private health-care systems, which is prohibited under the *Canada Health Act*. Under the guise of 'meeting the needs of a new generation,' CMA also suggested that private insurance and private clinics would improve access to services and reduce wait times.

RNAO was vocal in its opposition to the plan, dubbed *Medicare Plus*, and sent an open letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, reminding him of the dangers of a two-tier system. We also issued an action alert and more than 400 nurses sent letters of their own to the prime minister (see pg. 22).

Our advocacy worked.

Federal Health Minister Tony Clement responded immediately in the media and in a letter to RNAO, stating in no uncertain terms that: "We do not support any recommendations related to the establishment of a two-tiered health-care system or dual practice by physicians."

The second attack on our publicly funded system came a few weeks later; this one from the Canadian Constitution

Foundation (CCF), an Alberta-based organization that is funding a lawsuit challenging the Ontario government on timely access to health care and patients' ability to buy private health insurance. This organization is, in effect, trying to dismantle Medicare by seeking to remove all prohibitions on private health care.

At a CCF news conference on Sept. 5, I sat alongside a number of reporters as the foundation introduced the second of two patients to make a constitutional challenge against the laws governing health care in Ontario. I spoke to many reporters that day, reminding them that health care

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in Canada is a human right, not a commodity to be bought and sold. I explained that the minute you introduce private insurance into our system, you create two classes of patients: those who can afford to jump to the front of the queue and those (the majority) who cannot. The latter wait in a line that is longer, the cost to taxpayers is higher, and overall health outcomes are worse.

RNAO has been challenging these kinds of attacks for many years and nurses have responded unwaveringly. Now we have another powerful ally in Michael Moore, a documentary filmmaker whose passion for publicly funded

health care is abundantly clear in his latest documentary, *SiCKO*.

I was invited to preview the movie and as soon as I saw it, I knew it was a tool we must use to tackle the kinds of attacks on Medicare described above. Suddenly, I was hit with an idea: nurses need to extend an invitation to see *SiCKO* to politicians, the individuals who hold the future of Medicare in their hands. RNAO sent an action alert to assembly members and more than 40 took us up on the offer (see pg. 20).

Moore was thrilled with the initiative. In a public statement he said: "...I want to thank RNAO for encouraging members to bring your political leaders to go see *SiCKO*. It's important to remind your elected officials how critical it is to protect your Medicare system established by Tommy Douglas, and the values and ideals behind it of taking care of everyone in society, no matter how rich or poor..."

The leaders from all of Ontario's political parties, and the three national leaders, were personally invited to see the film. We were very pleased with the genuine interest in the issues and challenges of privatization shown by those who participated.

Federal Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion accepted our invitation on Aug. 16, and participated in a roundtable discussion immediately following the movie. I was so proud of all the RNAO members who attended, many sharing not only their values and visions for a healthy system, but also the evidence behind those values.

There's no question in my mind that while attacks on our publicly funded, not-for-profit system by organizations like CMA and CCF will continue, they won't hold up against nurses' knowledge, courage and perseverance to protect and strengthen Medicare, and to advance the vision that Tommy Douglas dreamed about five decades ago.

Stand tall and proud my colleagues. **RN**

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