

July 22, 2011

“Simpson Supper”... The need for an “adult conversation” about Medicare’s Future!

Jeffrey Simpson, the award winning columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, was recently invited by some of Canada’s senior health leaders to share his thoughts on Canada’s Medicare programs... past, present, future. The event, held on June 14th at the Rideau Club in Ottawa, was co-hosted by CHLNet and the Health Action Lobby. Following a reception sponsored by our friends at Odgers Berndtson, over 50 of Canada’s senior leaders from government and national health organizations were challenged by Jeffrey Simpson to engage in what he called an “adult conversation” about the future of Medicare in Canada.

The role of the federal government has clearly changed over the years, perhaps reaching its zenith with the passage of the Canada Health Act in April of 1984. (Mr. Simpson is well on his way to completing a book on how it is that the Canada Health Act has taken on such iconic status in Canada. The book is due to be released sometime in the fall of 2012.) Simpson contends that Canada has fallen behind virtually every other industrialized country in the world based on independent comparisons of health system efficiency and effectiveness. The challenge is that, while in virtually every other respect we have one of the best neighbours in the world when it comes to the United States, we happen to “live next to the wrong neighbour” when it comes to health care. The USA exists, it would appear, to help make our Medicare system look good and this has lulled us into complacency.

Medicare is, contrary to some suggestions from senior leaders, eminently sustainable. But some tough choices lie ahead, said Simpson. Canadians need to discuss the tradeoffs. The reality is that health care priorities are taking up more and more spending room both at the national level in terms of percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in terms of provincial program spending. As a consequence, other worthwhile pursuits such as funding post-secondary education are being squeezed. This involves again making informed choices as a society on what we think is most important. We can fund more good things like health and education, but that means either spending less on something else or raising the taxes necessary to meet public expectations. The challenge seems to be creating the opportunity to have this kind of meaningful dialogue or “adult conversation” with Canadians.

It is also unfortunate that so much of the political discourse tends to conflate fact with fiction said Simpson. Nowhere is this more the case than when it comes to the role of the private sector in Canadian health care. The reality is that both private sector finance and private sector delivery have been essential elements of Canada’s Medicare programs since the original Hall Commission in 1964. Yet the public debate tends to conflate the roles in ways that help one party or another or one lobby group or another score political points. The future of Medicare will depend to a large degree on having a frank, evidence-based discussion around the appropriate role of the private sector, especially as we look at how to address the longstanding issues such as the need for a national formulary for prescription drugs or the emerging issues around care of the elderly.

Jeffery Simpson challenged those present to do their part to engender the kind of “adult conversation” that is so needed to secure the future of our universal health care programs.

A lively question and answer session ensued where some of the obstacles to informed dialogue were identified. Health is seen by many as simply too “hot” for politicians to deal with, especially in the context of an election. The impetus or stimulus is therefore likely to have to come from outside government. Everyone is seen as having their own agenda, whether it is the unions, professional associations or disease groups, and Simpson challenged these organizations to be part of a broader solution rather than simply advocating for their personal interests. How do we engage Canadians in this public discussion? And, of course, there was an animated exchange around whether it is a federal or provincial responsibility to tackle important challenges such as how to best address paying for the ever-increasing cost of out-of-hospital prescription drugs.

If the Simpson supper is any indication, CHLNet is well positioned to work with other multi-professional, multi-lateral organizations such as HEAL to create the space to have this open, transparent, evidence-informed “adult conversation” around the future of Medicare. The Network Partners will be looking at how best to build on this leadership dialogue session. Meanwhile, many thank to Jeffrey Simpson for egging us on!