

## **Firstly, Do No Harm**

(This article touches on the politics of health care and the frustration for both patients and practitioners of modalities which are not fairly funded by our public system.)

As Canadians, we watch our neighbours to the south struggle to provide health care for all of its citizens. We have our precious Canada Health Act and the federal government transfers millions of dollars to the provinces each year to provide us with the health care services we need. The government of BC has the monumental task of fulfilling the requirements of the Act (to provide a publicly administered system that is accessible to all) and balance the budget, all the while protecting the safety of the public.

But, costs are rising faster than anyone expected and many unintended consequences are emerging. We don't need yet another expensive Royal Inquiry or Commission to tell us what the problems are- we need new thinking if we are to save one of our country's most cherished institutions.

Consider the real-life story of J.P. – a single woman, working two part-time cleaning jobs and struggling to make ends meet. It was Christmas time, 3 years ago. Her daughter and newborn grandson were visiting. For 2 nights J.P. slept on the old couch and somehow hurt her back. The muscle spasms settled in up and down her spine and wouldn't let go. Her first thought was to see her old Chiropractor. He'd been helpful in the past with other problems.

But J.P. was on BC's MSP premium assistance and her allotment of 10 subsidized visits to licensed (but non-medical) health care providers had all been used up at the massage therapist's office over the summer, dealing with a bad case of tennis elbow. The treatments had worked like a charm and she managed to stay within her budget. Without the subsidy, a visit to her Chiropractor would cost \$45 – straight out of her pocket. It was Christmas. Her pockets were empty and her choices few.

Her Medical doctor ordered Xrays - which showed nothing out of the ordinary- so she was prescribed a strong muscle relaxant (Flexuril) and an anti-inflammatory (Ibuprofen). She was told that a Chiropractor wouldn't be able to help her and advised to take a few weeks off work to rest. During that time she developed a wicked case of heartburn – a reaction to the Ibuprofen – so she was also given an acid reducing drug (Zantac) for her stomach. Now it seemed her back was hurting even more and at some point she lost both jobs, forcing her onto social assistance. Her reactive depression required Paxil, she is waiting on an appointment with a rheumatologist for what might be fibromyalgia. In the meanwhile, she developed a serious dependency on the OxyContin which was prescribed to help her cope with her (now chronic) pain. Three years on from her back injury, JP has been unable to exercise so she is now 40 pounds overweight and her

blood pressure is rising, as are her blood sugars. A water pill and a diabetes drug have recently been added to the list.

In order to save a couple of hundred dollars on the chiropractic care she needed 3 years ago – and would have chosen if she could – the government of BC has now spent tens of thousands of dollars on her care. And that's just until now, because there will be more costs. With her ongoing heartburn, she recently started on a stronger medication (a proton pump inhibitor), which is linked to an increased risk of osteoporosis and chronic kidney disease and dementia. Yikes!

JP is 53 years old.

Our Health Care System is not making her healthier!

The unintended consequences of short-term, narrowly focused thinking can be huge. When BC's government chose to de-list non-medical health care services in order to save money, they chose to discourage the use of approaches that can be cheaper, safer and more effective.

These days there's much finger-wagging about opiate abuse and health care costs that are spiraling out of control but we should be equally concerned about the environmental impact of government policies which favour a pharmaceutical solution to patients' suffering. Recent news reports tell us that 'chemicals of emerging concern' such as Ibuprofen, Paxil, Zantac and OxyContin are showing up in the bodies of young salmon off our coast.

And JP's back still hurts.

Do we need yet another expensive government inquiry to find workable solutions? No. We just need to change the fact that our system has become one where the merchant medical doctor faces no competition and the consumer patient has a blank cheque for unlimited shopping (at just the one store of course).

In their book, *Squandering Billions* (Hancock House, 2005), Dr. Don Nixdorf and Garry Bannerman provide intriguing and practical solutions for reforming our Health Care System, with the goal of empowering patients to choose the care that they need. It is not the government's place to say 'no' to approaches that are proven and safe and affordable.

Abandoning the 'fee-for-service' model and establishing Community Health Clinics where the services of all licensed health care providers are available would be two simple steps in the right direction.

There is considerable evidence that for someone like JP, chiropractic care provides a better outcome for much less money – and it's drug-free, so it's safer for patients and

it's better for our environment. A Medical monopoly is not good for patients, it's not good for taxpayers and it's not good for the fish!

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