

JOHN CARPAY

## *Canada's 'wait care'*

If only Michael Moore was correct in his glorified portrayal of Canada's health care system in his movie "Sicko."

While "Sicko" is right to say that Canadians can leave their checkbooks at home when going to a hospital or clinic, the "documentary" is dead wrong to claim that Canada's health system "costs nothing" and is "stress-free."

Canadian women with breast cancer often wait several weeks for surgery, even after a clear diagnosis of breast cancer by needle biopsy. Those are not "stress-free" weeks.

Nor was Canada's government monopoly health system "stress-free" for the parents of Jordan Johanson, an 18-year-old suffering from acute appendicitis, who had to wait 12 hours in a hospital emergency room before receiving surgery.

Johanson checked into the emergency department of the Rockyview Hospital in Calgary, Alberta, on March 24, 2007. This was one day after visiting a walk-in medical clinic, where the government-paid doctor failed to diagnose the appendicitis and instead prescribed antibiotics.

The 12-hour wait in emergency proved too long: Jordan Johanson died shortly after receiving his surgery.

Nevertheless, the Calgary Health Region's investigation of Jordan's death concluded that there were "no inordinate or preventable delays" in surgery.

Canadian medical reports will list "appendicitis" or other medical conditions as his cause of death, not the 12-hour wait in emergency. This reporting practice makes it very difficult to know how many Canadians die each year in a system that is now frequently called "wait care" rather

than "health care."

Most of the problems with the American health care system featured in "Sicko" also exist north of the U.S. border.

For example, "Sicko" claims that U.S. insurance companies are motivated to provide less medical care for financial reasons. So, too, are Canada's government-run hospitals, where every patient is a drain on a limited budget that is allocated by unaccountable bureaucrats.

"Sicko" features Americans who suffered irreparable harm to their health. In Canada, irreparable harm to health is a common consequence of waiting three, nine or 18 months for surgery.

"Sicko" complains about favoritism: In the States the nephew of an insurance company CEO is unlikely to be denied medical coverage or benefits. It's no different in Canada's government-run system, where a physician's spouse, child or parent probably won't have to join other Canadians by suffering in pain on a waiting list for months on end.

Perhaps the most misleading claim in "Sicko" is that Canada's health care system "costs nothing."

Taxes in Canada are at least one-third higher than in the U.S. In Canada, government spending on health care takes up between 40 percent and 50 percent of provincial budgets. And while spending on the government's health monopoly continues to grow much faster than population growth and inflation, waiting lists remain as long as ever.

The suffering and death caused by Canada's waiting lists are so bad that constitutional actions have been launched in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario challenging the

government's health monopoly for violating the right to life and to security of the person.

In Ontario, Lindsay McCreith is challenging the province's ban on private health insurance because, after being told that he might have a brain tumor, he was told he'd have to wait more than four months for an MRI. Worried about his health and desperate for a faster solution, he paid out-of-pocket for an MRI in Buffalo, which revealed a golf-ball-sized brain tumor. Even with this diagnosis, the Ontario government monopoly health system still told McCreith he would need to wait three months for a consultation with a neurosurgeon, and then sign on to another waiting list for surgery. In his constitutional challenge, McCreith relies on the 2005 Supreme Court of Canada decision in *Chaoulli v. Quebec (Attorney General)*.

Ruling that "access to a waiting list is not access to health care," the Supreme Court struck down the province of Quebec's ban on private health insurance as violating the right to life and personal security. Based on the evidence presented by Canadian doctors, the court noted that waiting lists cause physical and mental suffering, irreparable harm to health -- and sometimes death.

In contemplating the Canadian health care model, Americans should ask themselves whether they want to pay higher taxes and lose their right to buy private health insurance, a product which is outlawed in Canada.

"Sicko" is right in pointing out that America's health care system has problems that need to be addressed. But adopting the Canadian system would be a cure that is worse than the disease.