



Health monopoly plain unhealthy

The debilitating consequences of Canada's government health care monopoly, created by making private health insurance illegal, continue to rear their ugly heads.

Media reported last week that Tom Kettering of Abbotsford, BC, is selling everything he owns to pay for brain surgery in the US, because no doctor in Canada will perform the surgery he needs to remove a cyst. Having suffered debilitating headaches for a decade, and spending most of his time in a dark bedroom with sunglasses on, Kettering states "It's pretty much hell. It's pain everywhere. Your face goes numb." Like many other Canadians, Kettering has had to stop working, sell his business, and accept around-the-clock pain.

Calgary university student Kristina Waldmann tells a similar story: "I was in pain all the time, severe headaches all the time, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, visual problems. I had to stop going to school, to work, to my volunteer position. I was stuck at home in pain — not able to do anything," she says. Waldmann's parents re-mortgaged their home and held fundraisers so she could get brain surgery in Texas. She's been pain-free since the surgery in March, saying "I have my life back."

Shane Wambolt of Fort McMurray experienced migraines, tremors and blackouts until he paid \$250,000 for brain surgery in the US to remove a cyst from his pineal gland, surgery deemed "elective" by Alberta Health Services.

Of course health care in Canada is miles ahead of what patients receive in Third World countries. But that is

cold comfort to hundreds of thousands of Canadian patients who suffer in pain on waiting lists, often prevented from working to support themselves and their families.

This is not what Tommy Douglas had in mind when introducing Canada's first government health program in Saskatchewan in the 1940s. Ironically, one of the key reasons for creating Saskatchewan's program was to address the problem of people not being able to work due to sickness or injury. But Canadians waiting for medically necessary surgery today are no better off than patients in Saskatchewan in the 1940s.

The ideals of Tommy Douglas were betrayed in the 1980s, when provincial health programs were turned into government monopolies. Today, provincial laws across Canada create a government monopoly over essential medical services like brain surgery, orthopedic surgery, and cancer treatment.

Europeans, Australians, Japanese, and others around the globe understand the difference between a government program and a government monopoly. While Canadians count their wait times in months and even years, the citizens of France, Germany, and dozens of other countries count their wait times in days and weeks. The reason is simple: other countries do not legislate a government monopoly over health care. Instead, they create government programs to assist those who need it most, while respecting the right and freedom of patients to make their own choices about health services and health insurance.

A government monopoly over health care is no different than any other monopoly: inefficient, insensitive and unaccountable. When a monopoly

fails to deliver timely, high-quality services, there are no economic consequences for it. The monopoly happily stumbles along, with no risk it will ever go out of business. The only consequences are for suffering patients, who must resign themselves to waiting in pain, unable to work.

Imagine if we took our government monopoly approach to health care and applied it to other sectors. Instead of a government program for public housing, we would outlaw private home ownership, in the name of equality. Instead of a public transit program, we would outlaw private car ownership, in the name of fairness. If a government monopoly (as opposed to a government program) is a bad idea in other areas, why would it work well in health care?

Eventually, Canadians will rise up against the government health care monopoly, and demand it be reverted back to a government program, as Tommy Douglas wanted. Sadly, until that happens, thousands of people like Tom, Kristina, and Shane will continue to face a stark choice: suffer in pain on a waiting list, or put a second mortgage on your home to obtain surgery abroad.

Calgary lawyer John Carpay is president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (www.jccf.ca), which acts for Darcy Allen in his constitutional challenge to the government health monopoly in Alberta.