
BACKGROUND

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Office of the Premier
Ministry of Health

Speech from the Throne

The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, Lieutenant Governor

**at the Opening of the Second Session,
Thirty-Eighth Parliament of the Province of British Columbia**

February 14, 2006

Excerpt on health:

The Transformational Force of Our Aging Population

The Western world is getting older. People are living longer. Families are getting smaller.

These facts are well known, but over the last two decades, their ramifications have seldom been reflected in government decision-making. Too often short-term thinking and election cycles blind us to generational needs. Together, we must strive to change that.

The findings of the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues will provide new insights for our consideration and action. As our population ages, there will be ever-fewer taxpayers, supporting ever-more seniors with increasingly complex needs.

There will be fewer new workers to fuel our economy. Skilled workers will be even more in demand. Canada will look to address that imbalance through immigration and new use of knowledge and technology. Our country will increasingly open its arms to the Asia-Pacific as a primary new source of human capital and productivity.

Today, seniors account for one-in-seven British Columbians. By 2030, they will account for one-in-four. This obliges us to change.

Nowhere is that need more profound than in health care. As our population ages, the demand for health services grows exponentially.

It is not just that people are living longer and that we are challenged to provide more care and new options for independent living. The demand for health care is rapidly outstripping our ability to supply health professionals, equipment, and facilities.

New knowledge and new technology drive up drug costs and diagnostic costs, and create new demands for expensive new services and treatments.

Governments around the world are struggling to keep up with this reality. The profile of health needs is radically changing.

The increase in dementias is one such example. To increase efforts to help find a cure for these debilitating and destructive diseases, your government will strive to establish a national research collaborative, working together with the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation.

If we can impede and eliminate these dementias we will improve our citizens' quality of life and also reduce pressure on health budgets in the years ahead.

In Canada, we have known for many years that the escalation in health care costs is not sustainable.

The question for all British Columbians is this: Are we prepared to change to face up to that fact?

What are the fundamental changes we must make to improve our health and to protect our precious public health care system for the long-term?

Your government will initiate a province-wide conversation to tackle that question head-on. It will build on the transformative changes already undertaken to renew our health care system here in B.C.

We will seek the world's best advice on how to improve our health care system in British Columbians' long-term interests. A new, independent Foundation for Health Care Innovation and Renewal will be established to help identify new ways of better serving our citizens' health needs through careful examination of successful health models now working around the world.

This month, the Premier and Health Minister will travel to Sweden, Norway, France, and the United Kingdom to learn first-hand how those jurisdictions are acting to transform their health care systems.

Your government will ensure that any changes it makes are consistent with the Canada Health Act. That Act holds out the promise of universal, accessible, comprehensive, portable, and publicly administered health care.

Yet after four decades of public health care, supported by over \$1.5 trillion dollars in public expenditures, those five principles remain largely undefined.

What does the principle of "universality" mean when some citizens have special access to services and surgical options that others do not have, for lack of extended or private insurance? Or when only a handful of provinces even offer catastrophic drug coverage?

What does the principle of "accessibility" really mean, in light of existing access to primary care, surgical care, or extended care across Canada?

What does "comprehensive" and "portable" mean to Canadians, given the wide discrepancy in insurable services across our country?

How should we define concepts like "reasonable access" to "medically necessary" services, so that the courts are not left to interpret them for us?

Does it really matter to patients where or how they obtain their surgical treatment if it is paid for with public funds?

Why are we so afraid to look at mixed health care delivery models, when other states in Europe and around the world have used them to produce better results for patients at a lower cost to taxpayers?

Why are we so quick to condemn any consideration of other systems as a slippery slope to an American-style system that none of us wants?

And why shouldn't we build our health care system on a foundation of sustainability? Are we really ensuring that the health care entitlements we enjoy as Canadians will be there for our children and future generations as our population ages?

These are just some of the tough questions that British Columbians – and all Canadians – should have the opportunity to consider.

Not through another Royal Commission. Not through another exercise in avoidance, designed to produce more of the same.

But through real dialogue.

Through open conversations and rational discussion aimed at improving and transforming our Canadian health care system.

The Canada Health Act needs to be updated. Not to make it weaker – but to make it stronger and consistent with its original vision and intent – to preserve public health care for all Canadians.

Your government will advance that goal in Ottawa and here in B.C. It will lead an extensive discussion with British Columbians to guide this Assembly in furthering fundamental health reform within this mandate.

British Columbia will define and enshrine in provincial law the five principles of the Canada Health Act, and it will add to those a sixth – the principle of sustainability.

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