

Posted AT 5:25 AM EST ON 23/11/06

Ottawa 'dropped the ball' on waiting times

Tory government has no plan to address health-care failure, opposition declares

LISA PRIEST

FROM THURSDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

For the second day in a row, the Tory government was taken to task on Canada's health-care system yesterday, with the opposition charging that it had "dropped the ball" on waiting times.

Liberal health critic Ruby Dhalla charged that Health Minister Tony Clement has only "Band-Aid solutions and no concrete plan to reduce wait times."

Her comments in the House of Commons yesterday follow Globe and Mail stories that revealed how only 50 to 60 per cent of hospitals are meeting the health accord standards of radiating cancer patients within four weeks.

Prostate cancer patients fared the worst, with 70 per cent of hospitals failing to radiate them in four weeks. Breast cancer numbers were also disturbing, with 47 per cent of hospitals not meeting that target, according to a survey done by the Canadian Association of Radiation Oncologists.

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"The minister has given nothing but lip service and has failed to fight for health care on behalf of all Canadians at the cabinet table," Ms. Dhalla told the House of Commons. "How does he expect to reduce wait times for all Canadians without any money and without a real plan?"

Mr. Clement responded that Canadians know, under his government, "they can expect more and they get more" when it comes to reducing waiting times. But in an interview, Ms. Dhalla said she does not believe the Conservatives have the political will to fight for health care. In particular, she

is concerned there is no catastrophic drug plan to help those 600,000 Atlantic Canadians without coverage.

East Coast cancer patients are taking out loans, racking up credit-card debt and rationing pills in an effort to afford crucial, costly prescriptions. Although estimates vary, some have said such a program would cost only \$2-billion annually.

"There's a tremendous amount of resistance to taking a look or studying catastrophic drug coverage and that's a tremendous disservice to Canadians," Ms. Dhalla said.

Indeed, a story about unequal access to a colorectal cancer drug has meant that Canada -- for the first time -- cannot participate in a key clinical cancer trial.

The trial, run by the National Cancer Institute in the United States, was studying what drug is most effective with chemotherapy -- Avastin or Erbitux -- or if they work best given together. Since Avastin is largely unavailable, Canada could not participate.

Philip Branton, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Cancer Research, described the situation as frustrating, saying more cases like this may come up, given the high cost of new cancer drugs.

"Even if a drug in a large population doesn't work well, it might work really, really well for a few," Dr. Branton said. Avastin provides a median 4.7-month increase in survival to incurable colorectal cancer patients. Doctors said some do far better; others who do not respond discontinue therapy.

Barry Stein, president of the Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada, argued that provincial governments have an "extra duty of care" to ensure patients receive the most effective treatments, especially since there is no organized colorectal cancer screening program that could catch these cancers early or prevent them.

"We know patients who are not doing well on other therapies require access to these new and novel types of therapies," he said. ". . . It gives the patient an opportunity they would not have had before."

Whatever the case, it is the patients who ultimately suffer.

Ann Marie Kerr, 57, of Saint John was working as a realtor until a diagnosis of metastatic colorectal cancer changed her world in July, 2004.

She does not know if she would benefit from Avastin because she has not been offered it; it's not funded in New Brunswick.

"If I thought that there was something better that would make me better or live longer, I don't know what I'd do to get it," she said. "If I was in Newfoundland, I would be able to get the drug."

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