



51% say private care OK

Polls find growing acceptance of alternative

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National Post

Friday, June 02, 2006

Just over half of Canadians believe they should have the right to buy private health care if they think medicare is not meeting their needs, according to a series of nationwide polls.

The Chaoulli decision by the Supreme Court of Canada last year has altered the mindset of Canadians and made them more open to the concept of buying private health care, said Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group Inc., which conducted the surveys.

"It used to be more of a two-to-one or 60-40 split in favour of the public system," Mr. Lyle said.

"What the Chaoulli decision has done is that it brought an argument into public debate that people didn't talk a lot about before, which is the price some individuals have to pay for a policy....

"We were thinking about whether it's fair to let one person go first instead of whether it is fair to make someone wait in pain and maybe even die on a waiting list in order to make everyone equal."

In Chaoulli, the Supreme Court declared Quebec's ban on private health insurance unconstitutional.

Eighty-five per cent of respondents to Innovative Research Group Inc.'s surveys believe the government should focus on making the public system better so "no one feels any need to pay for private health care"; but about half of them are open to private medicare if the public system fails.

Fifty-one per cent of respondents identify with the statement "If we are unhappy with the service we receive from medicare, we should have the right to spend our own money to buy health care from outside the public medicare system."

The remaining respondents (49%) believe that "when it comes to health care, everyone should be equal and no one should be allowed to spend their own money to get better services."

The results are based on surveys of at least 3,000 people from January until May.

Mr. Lyle will be presenting the findings tomorrow to the Coalition of Family Physicians of Ontario.

The polls also show that more than half of Canadians either have (22%) or are interested in buying insurance (34%) that gives them access to private health care in Canada or abroad if they or family members are seriously ill and have to wait for care in Canada.

According to the polls, 44% of respondents support private medical clinics while 39% are opposed to them.

The pollsters divided the respondents into four groups based on their values.

Three out of 10 Canadians (29%) are "private true believers." They are adamant about their right to pay from their own pockets if the public system is inadequate. They also have no problem with two-tier health care or people making a profit from public health dollars.

"Ambivalent egalitarians" (22% of Canadians) are nervous of the profit motive but think that a parallel system may relieve the stress on the public system. They also strongly believe that people should be able to spend their own money as they choose.

"Pragmatic public supporters" (26% of Canadians) oppose allowing patients to pay for care but don't mind private delivery so long as the government pays.

Finally, for "public true believers" (22% of Canadians) it's more important to make sure that everyone has equal access and no one should make a profit from public health dollars.

"There's a real debate right now," Mr. Lyle said. "The challenge for public-sector supporters is that they've got to demonstrate results."

A majority of respondents (68%) said they were worried that if we allow a parallel private system, the best doctors will work in the private system.

The results are weighted by Statistics Canada data and are considered accurate within at least plus or minus 1.81 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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