

dialogue

September 20, 2007

A bi-weekly update on issues
affecting health care in Ontario

Parties out of the election gate with health promises

Little mention of LHINs in the party platforms

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The main political parties face many potential issues in the health sector, including staffing standards in long term care, competitive bidding in home care, public-private partnerships, contracting out, and divestment of mental health services. A legal challenge from the right-wing Canadian Constitution Foundation has even raised questions about commitment to the fundamental principles behind Medicare. Despite the recent reorganization of the health system into 14 Local Health Integration Networks, the parties have said little about them — so far.

Liberals

The Liberals are running on their record, including improved wait times for cancer, cardiac and cataract surgeries, hip and knee replacements and MRI/CT scans. They promise to expand that list to include emergency room visits as well as children's and general surgeries. They have committed \$8.7 billion in additional spending over the next four years (a slower rate of investment than the \$9.3 billion they spent over the previous four years).

In long term care, George Smitherman has said he would establish a staffing and care standard. He says that an average of 2.83 hours of care per resident per day — what the government says is the present status quo — would be a starting point, but the way they calculate the standard may be different from what the health care unions are seeking.

The Liberals have sidestepped competitive bidding in home care,

only suggesting that they are open to discussing employment and labour issues.

Many of their basic promises are not unlike the Tories — more doctors, e-health by 2015, and more full-time nurses.

The Liberals would also add to the number of family health teams, hire 9,000 more nurses (2,000 in long term care) and increase funding for mental health.

The Liberals continue to march ahead with their P3 hospital projects — several more being announced just prior to the election. However, the Liberals are quick to point out that ancillary services — except for hard facility maintenance and life-cycle maintenance — were taken out of the projects in December 2006. In all, there are about 100 hospital projects either announced or underway in the province.

Tories

John Tory says he'll target funding to high-growth and underserved regions, to long term care and care for children, to reduce waiting lists and to modernize health care facilities.

The Tories plan to eliminate the health tax and spend \$8.5 billion more on health over the next four years — slightly less than the \$8.7 billion promised by the Liberals. On the other hand, he has promised to find \$1.5 billion in "efficiencies" across government. Given health care is close to half the provincial

budget, it is not clear if he is promising to both give and take away.

The Tories are the only party to suggest wait times and access can be improved by working partly with private sector partners. "A John Tory government would open the door to innovative partnerships provided that services are paid for by OHIP, meet provincial standards and do not allow queue jumping or patients paying out of their own pockets."

Frank Klees muddied this promise by musing out loud that a "minimal dissuasion fee" would deter needless visits to the emergency room or to a doctor, but only be based on the ability to pay.

The platform document discusses doctors and registered nurses under its human resources goals, but little is mentioned of other health professions. However, there is a promise to expand the scope of practice of certain professions. For example, the platform states pharmacists could be allowed to make a decision to extend a patient's prescription, as is presently the case in Alberta.

While the Liberals have set a target of 70 per cent full-time nurses, the Tory platform limits that promise to registered nurses, but sets a target date of 2010.

During a recent all-candidates debate on long term care, John O'Toole said the Tories would set a target of three hours of care per resident per day, but would not go as far as introducing a regulation making such standards mandatory. *More/2*

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O'Toole also said the Tories would place an emphasis on upgrading and expanding long term care beds.

The platform also promises investment in e-health, giving patients control over their electronic record.

Despite being the party that first introduced P3 hospitals to Ontario – Brampton's William Osler and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre were first negotiated under the Eves government – the platform is silent on P3 infrastructure projects.

New Democrats

The New Democrats have decided to release their platform in stages.

Howard Hampton made headlines early in the campaign with his promise to cut the health tax for individuals earning less than \$48,000 per year, and by reducing the health premium by \$450 for those earning more than \$48,000 but less than \$80,000.

In long term care, the NDP support the call for 3.5 hours of personal care per resident per day. They also would introduce an independent ombudsman to provide oversight of long term care.

In home care, the NDP would extend successor rights to workers

and commit to ending “the cutthroat practice of privatization through competitive bidding.” The party also says they support the issue of parity between health care workers in the community and those who work in institutional care.

The New Democrats would end the practice of building and operating hospitals using the Alternative Financing and Procurement Model – better known as P3s. They would bring these hospital back into the public sector. They would also take away the power of the Local Health Integration Networks to contract out and privatize health and ancillary services.

The party would address the auditor's recommendations on land ambulance, and upload services from the municipalities.

Green Party

The Greens put an emphasis on wellness, promising to double funding to the Ministry of Health Promotion.

They also call for full disclosure of all P3 agreements for future development of health care facilities. They do not rule out more P3s – only that whatever funding system is used produce the best results.

The Greens would also make half of all hospital boards composed of health care professionals.

They would strike a deal with student doctors: a year's free tuition for every year a graduate doctor is willing to work in an underserved area.

The Greens would give a mandate to the Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) to monitor, support and fund “informal caregivers” – family and friends – to help seniors in their homes. Compensation for providing assisted daily living would be paid at the minimum wage.

The Greens say they would explore incentives to reward doctors who successfully assist their patients resolve risk factors such as obesity, smoking or high blood pressure.

Like the other parties, the Greens would support multi-disciplinary health care teams.

Their most expensive promise would be to phase in extended health coverage up to \$1,000 per year for three-quarters of the population. That could be used for the purchase of prescription drugs or care from any practitioner mandated by the Regulated Health Professionals Act. The top 25 per cent of income earners would be excluded from this benefit. This promise is expected to cost \$9.75 billion by 2012.

Upcoming Dates

Relman to speak on health care privatization

Tuesday, October 2nd / 7pm / St. Joseph's Healthcare, Hamilton – Dr. Arnold Relman, former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School, will be speak about the perils of health care privatization. Sponsored by OPSEU Local 206, Relman's research demonstrates that health care privatization is more expensive and less effective than public and non-profit care. Admission is free.

OFL Health Care Forum: Lessons from Britain

Saturday, November 24/ 12 Noon to 5 pm / Sheraton Centre, Toronto – Hear first-hand about the radical market-based changes to health care in Britain from UNISON, Britain's largest public sector trade union. Help craft the OFL's response to market-based health care reform in Ontario. Registration: \$100

Ontario Health Coalition Progressive Reform Conference – November 2 / Toronto
Ontario Health Coalition Action Assembly – November 3 / Toronto