

Stop the Healthcare Spin

5 ways citizens can reframe the public healthcare debate.

1. Reveal the Facts

□ We've all seen or heard how bad the healthcare system is in the US—tens of millions uninsured, massive crowds and lineups in public hospitals, a single trip to a doctor costing thousands of dollars. No-one in Alberta should want our healthcare system to end up like this. But here's a little-known fact about the US's healthcare system: as a percentage of GDP, it's *actually almost four times more expensive than Alberta's*. We spend 4 per cent of our annual GDP on healthcare, while the US spends 15 per cent of its GDP on healthcare. In other words, we spend far fewer resources and get a far superior system. But so often we hear the opposite: that healthcare costs in Alberta are “out of control,” that the only affordable system is one with many private delivery options (as in the US). Send letters to the editor, blog about it, tell friends, phone your MLA, shout it from the rooftops, put it in skywriting: our public healthcare system is not only affordable, it's nearly four times more affordable than the grossly inefficient and ineffective private US system. For more information about healthcare costs relative to GDP, see: www.friendsofmedicare.org/uploads/ParklandReport2.pdf

2. Counter the Propaganda

□ With the facts on the table, citizens can properly engage with those Albertans who, for ideological reasons or financial self-gain, would dismantle our “expensive” public healthcare and replace it with for-profit system. Any “crisis of overspending” is utterly manufactured; these politicians, lobby groups, private healthcare providers and neocon think tanks (such as the Fraser Institute) focus exclusively on



the rising absolute cost of healthcare, which is a red herring. Of course the cost is always rising; the cost of *everything* is always rising (the average cost of a new car has quadrupled since the '70s). Incomes are also rising. The cost of healthcare relative to our total provincial income—the best measure of healthcare's affordability—is actually *shrinking*. At the same time healthcare costs have risen, so has the value of the care offered. Life spans are increasing, infant mortality is decreasing and new cures and treatments are always being discovered. Don't let these facts be obscured by what is actually a very small but influential group of ideologues and self-interested profiteers.

3. Connect the Dots

□ Our governing party has presided over the world's second-largest oil reserves during a succession of energy booms over four decades—and what do we have to show for it? Barely \$14-billion in the Heritage Fund (which is actually losing money) and an almost \$8-billion dollar deficit for this year. (Fittingly, Health Minister Ron Liepert, in his first two years as an MLA, chaired the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee.) Today, our government claims to “need” to make cutbacks to healthcare

because of the deficit. Obviously, they wouldn't “need” to make cutbacks today if they'd saved yesterday. Demand that the government start saving our resource windfall before it's gone—in the Heritage Fund, in some other fund specifically set up to bolster healthcare when future revenues drop. And don't wait for a rosier economic climate or until an election to raise your voice; we may post deficits for years, but our resource windfall will shrink all the while. Phone or e-mail your MLA (www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla_home), or, better yet, make your demands in public: a schedule of upcoming PC party events is at www.albertapc.ab.ca (see “events”).

4. Amplify Your Voice

□ Every Albertan uses our public healthcare system. Very few Albertans will benefit from more private delivery. If citizens stand together and demand changes, the government will reverse its decisions. If they can't or won't fix their mistakes, we can opt for a new government (the next election may be as soon as two years from now). Join or donate to one of Alberta's opposition parties. If you're a nurse, get involved with the United Nurses of Alberta (www.una.ab.ca). Doctors can join Canadian Doctors for Medicare (www.canadiandoctorsformedicare.com). All citizens can donate to or become involved with Friends of Medicare (www.friendsofmedicare.org). For far too long, one narrow-minded political party and a handful of its influential friends have tried to undermine something we all own, something none of us can live without—our public healthcare system. Let's remind them who runs the show in a democracy: the citizens.

—Evan Osenton