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Stephen Harper's federal budget bad for your health

By Michael Byers

To quote Ed the Sock: "If you don't have anything good to say, say it often."

This might explain why the word tax appears more than 1,000 times in last month's federal budget, while overstretched and [out-of-work Canadians receive little meaningful support](#).

In fact, Stephen Harper's budget calls for more than \$20 billion in "new tax relief", including "reducing corporate income taxes so that Canada will have the lowest statutory corporate tax rate in the G7 by 2012."

Responsible governments pay for necessities first. And the budget—apart from promising \$500 million to digitize health records—does nothing to improve the quality of our lives through readily accessible, quality health care.

South of the border, Americans are learning the hard way about the long-term costs of neglecting health care.

Last December, after eight years of deep-reaching tax cuts, the congressional budget office reported: "The rising costs of health care and health insurance pose a serious threat to the future fiscal condition of the United States." It concluded that without government action, spending on health care would increase to 25 percent of the country's gross domestic product by 2025, up from 16 percent in 2007.

A December 18 *New York Times* article on the proposed U.S. stimulus package underscored the scale of the problem: "About a fifth of the [up to \$1 trillion] Obama package could go toward health care... The biggest piece would be up to \$100 billion to subsidize the states' growing Medicaid caseloads of the poor."

Unfortunately, Canada is on the same trajectory.

From 1993 to 2005, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin systematically underfunded our public-health-care system. The resulting declines in service created a market for private care where none existed before. Private, for-profit clinics like Vancouver's Cambie Surgery Centre emerged and began drawing much-needed nurses and doctors away from the public system.

Now, with Liberal backing, the Harper government is pushing us closer to the health-care brink. And neither party is listening to Canadians.

A January 14 Nanos poll asked Canadians how important it was for the government to increase investment in public services such as health care and education during an economic downturn. Of those who responded, 70 percent ranked it important (25.3 percent) or very important (44.5 percent). Nine percent felt it was unimportant.

These results prompted James Clancy, president of the National Union of Public and General Employees (which commissioned the poll) to say in a release: "It's not all about tax cuts and bailouts in the minds of Canadians. It's about people, jobs, and protecting our social safety net during tough times."

Investments in health care would constitute an economic stimulus, creating jobs while protecting those without employment. As Kathleen Connors, chair of the Canadian Health Coalition, pointed out in a January 13 release: "More than one in 10 Canadians work in this third-largest sector of the economy, and our public health-care system protects Canadians from one of the most devastating consequences of

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economic downturn in the United States, the loss of health care."

Connors also opposed the turn toward private health care, noting that "Privatized, for-profit health care has become an increasingly serious threat that forces people to pay more... and receive less."

In the United States, a family of four lucky enough to have access to an employer-supported health plan pays more than \$12,000 per year for coverage. Many millions of less fortunate Americans are uninsured. It's a terrible model to emulate, and yet the Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association has just launched a suit in B.C. Supreme Court asking to have patient-access restrictions at their private, for-profit clinics struck down.

The clinics—led by the ubiquitous Dr. Brian Day—base their argument on a 2005 Canadian Supreme Court judgment known as *Chaoulli v. Québec (Attorney General)*. That court held that a Quebec ban on private insurance for medically necessary services violated the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms because long wait times in the public system endangered life and personal security.

The argument would fail if the public system were adequately funded.

Adequate funding would also save money by creating a healthier, happier, more productive population. The market might be good at some short-term decisions, but—as the economic crisis has demonstrated—it cannot be trusted with long-term public policy. Privatizing health care divides societies into those who can and cannot pay. It undermines communities by promoting selfishness and inequality.

Nobody should have to choose between putting food on the table and accessing quality, timely health care. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

Harper's tax cuts are the wrong prescription for Canada. Let's build up the country instead of running it down.

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Harper hasn't touched health care funding in his 3 years in power because of the Romanow-Martin deal in 2004 which saw committed \$41 billion over 10 years, that was indexed to 5% each year.

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