



Farewell, Wizard of Oz

The federal and provincial/territorial ministers of health are meeting in Vancouver this week. The event is newsworthy for several reasons.

Perhaps most important is the fact that the federal and provincial/territorial ministers of health actually are meeting. It may sound absurd to point out that a physical gathering is significant. But it is.

Under the former government, there were few encounters between federal ministers and their provincial/territorial counterparts – at least as a group. In fact, national discussions were largely avoided, replaced instead by one-on-one conversations held on a bilateral basis.

Ottawa essentially had become the Wizard of Oz – the all-powerful, but rarely seen, player behind the scenes. The provinces and territories continued to collaborate around common areas of interest through the Council of the Federation. That pan-Canadian table allowed them to carry on their important work together, even in the absence of a federal partner.

The Vancouver meeting represents a first step in a substantial and complex agenda for health care reform in Canada. The Health Minister has been tasked with engaging the provinces and territories in a new multi-year Health Accord, which must include a long-term funding agreement.

Finding sufficient dollars for a wide-ranging revitalized health care agenda will be a tough challenge, given the current state of Canada's finances. The economy is ailing at the moment and will need a good dose of stimulus before it gets back on its feet.

While the prescription is patience, let's hope that Canada's economic recovery is not too long and winding a road. There is lots to do. The mandate letter of the federal Health Minister calls for a newly negotiated Health Accord, which must cover four key areas.

First, it must support the delivery of more and better home care services. Improvements include more access to high-quality in-home caregivers, financial supports for family care and, when

necessary, palliative care. This objective is vital, given the rapidly growing proportion of older persons in Canada.

It is noteworthy that the mandate letter also recognizes the critical role of informal caregivers in the care equation. These are the people who comprise the invisible backbone of the health care system. They provide more than 85 percent of the care delivered in the country – yet remain largely invisible and unrecognized for their vital work.

Second, a new Health Accord must advance pan-Canadian collaboration on health innovation to encourage the adoption of new digital health technology to enhance access, increase efficiency and improve outcomes for patients. There has long been recognition that Canada must do a better job at keeping pace with the technology times – for both improved health care and the economic spin-offs that come with high-tech jobs.

Third, there must be better access to necessary prescription medications. One possible solution involves bulk purchase in which Ottawa buys drugs with provincial and territorial governments to help make prescription medications more affordable. The high cost of drugs – especially for certain medications and for some individuals with rare or complex conditions – should never break the bank for households, or provinces and territories for that matter.

Finally, high-quality mental health services must be more available to Canadians who need them. It has become

clear that the current system is far from adequate in responding to the wide-ranging mental health needs of Canadians – young victims of cyberbullying, veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and the growing number of workers in this uncertain economy who face the wrenching stress of unemployment.

These are four vital objectives. In the past, these identified areas have always been treated as the poor cousin of health care, despite the vital roles they play in contributing to the health and well-being of Canadians.

Even with our fiscal frailty, these are exciting times for the country. The multi-year Health Accord is a national initiative that will set us on the road of collectively tackling many of our pressing challenges. Maybe that’s what the Prime Minister had in mind when he proclaimed to the world that Canada is back.

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