

The US Health Insurance Assault on Canadian Medicare

Canada's Response

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Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

There's nothing new about the US health insurance industry attacking Canadian Medicare. Back in the eighties, Burson Marsteller, PR front for the US industry, worked from its Toronto offices to publicly undermine the confidence of Canadians in their treasured Medicare program - a program which, according to the US industry, was "the largest unopened oyster in Canada".

Now, two decades later, as President Obama seeks to bring a universal single-payer system to the United States, the inevitable response is in full swing. Back in the sixties, when first Saskatchewan, and then Canada, were precariously inching their way towards universal single-payer health care, there were two extremes of doctors: the ones who fled to the United States to maximize their income under a profit-based system, and the ones who arrived from Britain to break the Canadian doctors' strike, and who worked for nothing to support the fledgling humanitarian principle: universal health care coverage affordable by all. (See Malcolm Taylor's dramatic history of the struggle to bring Medicare to Canada.[1])

The resulting Medicare system is Canada's most treasured social program, and has become a "defining national characteristic".

Canada's response to the current battle waging in the US can perhaps best be summed up in a recent eight-minute video[2] of a celebration of Canadian Medicare, featuring, among others, former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, and Commissioner of the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (2003).

It would greatly help to clarify US options if every American would watch this video.

If the US is ever to have a decent health care system (its infant mortality rate, a primary indicator of health status for countries worldwide, is higher than those of Cuba, Greece, Portugal, Macau, Slovenia, South Korea and Taiwan[3]), now is the time for its citizenry to sit up and take notice of successes elsewhere.

For example, 16 % of GDP the US pays on health care, with one-seventh of its people completely uninsured, is staggeringly high compared to 30 OECD countries, mostly in Europe, whose average health insurance cost is 8.9% of GDP[4]. No wonder the US health industry is employing attack ads against other systems: it stands to lose 7% of GDP.

If Americans believe the grossly misleading advertisements about Canada, they deserve no better than what they are presently getting: 16% of GDP spent on a system with hospitals

half-full, and over 45 million people completely uninsured.

The unfortunate tragedy is, that instead of viewing other models and expecting its government to provide a universal social safety net against illness, the US people allows its corporations to run an unfettered, profit-driven “devil take the hindmost” catastrophe.

At least that’s how some other countries see it.

References:

1. Malcolm Taylor. “Health Insurance and Canadian Public Policy: The Seven Decisions That Created the Canadian Health Insurance System and Their Outcomes,” McGill-Queens University Press, 1988.
2. The video is titled “Universal Health Care Message to Americans From Canadian Doctors & Health Care Experts”, and can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXXBCFnhsUc>.
3. Index Mundi. (<http://www.indexmundi.com/g/r.aspx?c=bg&v=29>).
4. “OECD Health Data 2009. How Does the United Kingdom Compare?”, p. 1. (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/46/4/38980557.pdf>).

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