

2011 ELECTION: PARTY PLATFORMS SHORT-SIGHTED ON HEALTH VISION

When it comes to the health of Canadians, the national political parties are definitely on the right track in recent days. Commendably, they have moved beyond simple commitments to maintaining cash transfers. Each of the election platforms now includes promises of funding, tax credits, and new hires. And some of the parties make commitments to address the rising costs of pharmaceutical drugs. We are even starting to hear acknowledgements of the importance of '2014' – the year the current accord between federal and provincial governments will end.

But we are not there yet. Each of the proposed initiatives is laudable. However, none of the parties has made clear what the initiatives are supposed to achieve. As the saying goes, if we don't know where we are going, any road will take us there.

Visions provide an end point – a target against which initiatives like the ones in the various election platforms can be measured; and those responsible can be held accountable. A health vision would provide a framework for various intervention entry-points, including disease prevention, community-based health services, as well as treatment. Also, a health vision would ensure that mental as well as physical health challenges are considered; that the elderly, the young, as well as those in between are included.

The vision for health from the perspective of the Canadian Healthcare Association is that Canadians, no matter where they live, and whatever their gender, socio-economic and ethno-cultural background, have access to the supports needed to optimize their health throughout their lives.

Canada is losing ground on health indicators: over half of Canadians have chronic diseases like cancer, arthritis, heart disease; one quarter of Canadians are obese. According to research from the insurance industry, a growing number of Canadians are absent from work due to mental health problems like depression – in fact, one study pegged absenteeism for this reason at 40 days per year per employee. These kinds of population health statistics mean that Canada cannot expect to perform well relative to other nations. Productivity, job performance and international leadership all depend on a vigorous and healthy population.

CHA believes that an effective and integrated health system contributes to the achievement of a health vision, and well articulated outcomes. According to the OECD, Canada is slipping behind other industrialized countries in terms of relative effectiveness and timeliness of care. To address this trend, CHA recommends that political parties consider how each of the components of the health system - from palliative care, through home care, long term care and acute care, to primary care – can contribute to their vision for the health of Canadians.

Polling confirms that health is the top concern among Canadians. Politicians can respond to voters by articulating a vision for health, showing how their proposed initiatives will help achieve that vision, and being clear on how accountabilities will be addressed.

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