

## Health system needs some private help, MacKinnon says

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Saskatchewan News Network; Saskatoon StarPhoenix

*Tuesday, November 19, 2002*

SASKATOON -- Canada's health-care system needs to partner with the private sector if it is going to address sky-high costs and avoid overwhelming the federal government's attempt to reduce child poverty and press for more innovation, Janice MacKinnon told a health vision conference Monday.

MacKinnon, who was finance minister under Roy Romanow's NDP government, told the delegates the debate over the country's health system has gotten bogged down in ideology and people have lost sight of what the system is to accomplish.

And that is to provide efficient, publicly administered health care with a single payer.

While health care is costing Canadians the same percentage of the country's gross domestic product to operate as it did a decade ago, government incomes from that GDP have been falling and the cost of health is encroaching on other important federal programs, she said.

People worry that allowing the private sector to play a greater role in health care will lead Canada down a path similar to the system in the United States, she said.

"There is no basis in fact for such fears. No report being written for any government in Canada is recommending a private American system," she said.

"(But) governments do not have to be involved in all aspects of health care."

MacKinnon's speech came just days before Romanow is scheduled to release a report on the future of health care in the province. Although she was Romanow's finance minister while Saskatchewan tackled its debt, she never mentioned the former premier, but did take issue with provincial governments complaining about the level of funding coming from Ottawa.

Since 1995 the federal government has launched two important national initiatives -- one to address child poverty in Canada and one to tackle the country's relatively poor showing in innovation. Both of these have taken billions of dollars but will require billions more.

During the same time the Ottawa has pumped \$20 billion extra into health care -- more money than it put into these other programs, she said.

It is also being asked to invest in other areas, such as Canada's crumbling infrastructure and the military.

While the percentage of the GDP going to health care has remained the same, the contribution to education has declined, she said.

Without investing in Canada's innovation, it will become impossible to maintain the country's standard of living or even pay for the health care, she said.

The responsibility to cover the cost of education is already being unduly shifted to users, with predictions a university degree will cost more than \$100,000.

"Are we so concerned about two-tier health care coming through the front door that we will allow two-tier education come in the back?" she asked.

She also pointed out that Canada is facing a bill in the hundreds of billions of dollars for facilities and equipment -- a backlog governments put off in order to cover the cash crunch for delivering health services.

If the country is going to wait for public funding to cover the cost of building, equipping and running all of these facilities, waiting lists will keep getting longer, she said.

But if it is to allow the private sector to build and equip, and have the public sector buying the services, it can avoid the up-front costs of addressing this shortfall, MacKinnon said.

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