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Completing Tommy's Vision: Next Steps to Expand and Improve Canada's Medicare System

*"Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to make a better world."
– Tommy Douglas*

May 4, 2007

REGINA -- More than 600 delegates gathered on May 3rd and 4th in the birthplace of the nation's Medicare system – Regina, Saskatchewan – to unite behind Tommy Douglas' vision for public health care.

The conference, *S.O.S. Medicare 2: Looking Forward*, brought together a stunning array of leading health care thinkers, providers, and activists in Canada, the U.S., and abroad. Delegates included academics, community activists, seniors, students, government officials, and health care workers representing the full spectrum of the system.

The conference heard from experts such as Monique Bégin, former Minister of Health and Welfare in the Trudeau government, Tom Kent, Principle Secretary to Prime Minister Pearson, Alan Blakeney, former Saskatchewan Premier, and Roy Romanow, former Saskatchewan Premier, and chair of the Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada.

The conference focused on completing what Tommy Douglas called Phase Two of Canada's universal public health care system. Phase One was universal public insurance for physician and hospital care. Phase Two will extend Medicare to homecare, long-term care, community care, pharmacare, and initiatives that address social determinants of health and disparities that poor health. Phase Two is also about managing health care better – through waitlist management, teamwork, integration, evidence-based practice and other innovations.

Tommy Douglas envisioned a Canada where all can live "free from fear, free from crippling debts when we fall ill."

His daughter, actress Shirley Douglas, opened *S.O.S. Medicare 2* by championing her father's vision and putting out a clarion call for new and invigorated action.

"Thousands of Canadians – seniors, the homebound, their family members – need support to live in health and dignity," Douglas said. "We need to complete my father's vision now."

Judith Shamian, a nurse with the Victoria Order of Nurses, stressed the need for immediate action.

“This is a mainstream agenda for millions and millions of Canadians. People are relying on us. The vulnerable can’t wait.”

Roy Romanow, said the plan for Phase Two has long been laid out – all that is missing is the political will to implement it.

Political leadership is needed to counter the growth of for-profits in Canada’s health care system, from insurance to delivery, support services to surgery, and in the very management and infrastructure of Medicare. Public health care is Canadians’ proudest achievement, yet it is being weakened by private forces whose primary motivation is profit rather than the health care of Canadians.

Dr. Arnold Relman of Harvard Medical Law School warned against for-profit delivery of health care, saying “it costs more, does not provide better care, and it poisons the system.”

Health care is a fundamental human right and yet our Medicare system is facing threats from judicial challenges that turn human rights legislation against the common good. This is a new era in which for-profit proponents are using the court system to undermine public health care.

These threats are particularly ominous in light of trade agreements that open the door for commercialization.

Success in expanding Medicare into Phase Two hinges upon Canadians working on many fronts. A broad range of individuals and organizations were at this conference; many more need to be included if we are to be successful in defending Phase One and achieving Phase Two.

Some provinces are supporting the innovations required to implement Phase Two; some are thwarting them and inviting privatization. The federal government is stalling with unconditional funding and pilot projects while disparities increase and commercial interests grow.

This conference, and our resolve to unite, is history in the making. Tommy’s vision has been reaffirmed. For that vision to be fully complete, we must work on all fronts and with an ever-broader coalition. The future well-being and health of Canadians depends on this.

For more information on the conference, visit <http://www.medicare.ca>