

Weve talked: now lets protect public health care

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s the finishing touches were being put on the 1500-page report from the BC governments yearlong *Conversation on Health*, Health Minister George Abbott continued to pussy-foot around the issue of increased privatization of our health care system.

Following a meeting with former UK Health Minister Frank Dobson who warned Abbott about going down the privatization road, Abbott told *The Tyee*, a Vancouver-based independent online daily magazine, that the information -wont keep him and his government from implementing what Abbott called "cautious, incremental reforms in BCs health care system."

This, even as the central message coming out of the *Conversation on Heath* is that British Columbians believe in -A strong and sustainable public health care system that delivers services to all British Columbians regardless of where they live, their incomes or their backgrounds and cultures."

The Conversation on Health report, released November 30, didnt come with any earth-shattering announcements from government about their plans for our health care system. But there are some very strong signs that government is speaking out of both sides of its mouth.

While the health minister led the announcement with strong statements about the public support for a public system, the report suggests that the year-long exercise hasnt produced the answers government was looking for:

While the vast majority of those in attendance at the forums were in support of the continuation of public health care in British Columbia, this same level of support was not as clear through the other avenues of input in the Conversation on Health. The debate between those in support of some element of private sector involvement in health care delivery and those who suggested a fully public delivery model and funding system continues to be fractious.

The continuing challenge in this debate is to ensure government does not dismiss the public support for a publicly funded, publicly delivered system.

Youll recall that Premier Gordon Campbell was front and centre in announcing the process, and he was

unequivocal in saying he wanted British Columbians to consider an increase in private, for-profit involvement in the public system.

In the 2006 Throne Speech, the governments position was clear:

Why are we so afraid to look at mixed health care delivery models, when other states in Europe and around the world have used them to produce better results for patients at a lower cost to taxpayers?

Why are we so quick to condemn any consideration of other systems as a slippery slope to an American-style system that none of us wants?

And in the first *Conversation on Health* consultation session in October 2006, the headline speaker, hand-picked by Premier Gordon Campbell to open the Conversation, was Dr. Brian Day, owner of the False Creek Surgical Centre and vocal proponent of increased private involvement in our health care system.

Mr. Campbell said he wanted to hear from British Columbians about their expectations and hopes for the future of our health care system through the *Conversation on Health*.

More than a year and 12,000 submissions later, we now have in front of us a 1,500 page summary report that governments first take on is that British Columbians value our public health care system. The health minister said this month that we can expect to start seeing legislation, regulation and policies that address changes to the health care system sometime this coming spring.

While initial indications are that the government heard British Columbians commitment to a publicly funded, publicly delivered, accessible and equitable health care system, it is up to each and every one of us to continue to work to ensure that governments actions reflect the commitment to a public system so strongly and consistently expressed during the *Conversation on Health*. 

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