

Supply—Health and Welfare

is really playing with words. The plan brought in did not outlaw private practice. That was the interpretation which was given it by certain persons who opposed the plan. It certainly was not concurred in by the law officers, but in order to satisfy any who might have fears in that regard, Premier Lloyd did agree to bring in amendments to the Act. But at the time the Act was introduced in the legislature I made it perfectly clear that our understanding and interpretation of the legislation, on the basis of opinions by the law officers, was that it left the medical profession the right, if they chose, to stay outside the plan.

I contend that the basic principle of having medicare available to each person, without requiring him to prove he is indigent or comes within a special category, has worked successfully, and I am convinced that if it is made applicable to all Canadians it will work equally well and be generally acceptable to the Canadian people.

Mr. Howard: Mr. Chairman, I want to raise one particular matter with the minister relating to an individual case which on the surface at least looks rather unique. It involves an individual who is the recipient of old age security payments and has a deduction from his cheques in order to cover what is claimed to be an overpayment made to him by the Department of Veterans Affairs. So far as I can understand, this is because of a provision in the Financial Administration Act. I should like to read into the record a letter sent to this individual by Mr. Bone, regional director of the federal department in Victoria, B.C. The letter is dated in September of last year. The amount of the overpayment is significant and I draw particular attention to it. The letter begins:

As you know, an overpayment amounting to \$6,926.34 was made to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs which is administered by the federal authorities.

An overpayment of \$6,900 is a fantastic amount. I understand the individual in question was receiving war veterans allowance at the rate of \$55 a month which, if the overpayment total is correct, would mean it extended over a period of some 10 years or more, an inordinate and unreasonably long period before it came to the attention of the authorities.

The letter continues:

Since these authorities were not successful in effecting collection of that overpayment the matter was referred to the federal Treasury Board. The

board has instructed, under the terms of the Financial Administration Act, that the amount of the overpayment be recovered by monthly deductions from payments of your old age security pension.

In the first place, this is news to me. I thought payments under the Old Age Security Act were inviolate and were not liable to attachment or deduction no matter what the reason, but apparently in this instance this was done.

I read further from the letter:

Beginning with the month of October, 1965 and continuing up to and including November, 1980, monthly deductions of \$38.00 will be made from your cheque. A deduction of \$10.34 will be made from your cheque for the month of December, 1980. Beginning with the month of January, 1891—

There must be a typographical error there. I think that should be 1981.

—payment will resume at the full monthly rate.

The gentleman who wrote to me has enclosed his cheque. He does not know what to do with the balance of \$37 left after the deduction was made. There is an interesting point I should like to draw to the attention of the minister. This gentleman obviously is 70 years of age now. Presumably deductions will be made from his old age pension cheque for the next 15 years. If he is 70 now he will be 85 when the repayments are finished. On the surface it just seems wrong. First, I think the Department of Veterans Affairs, if there was an overpayment of almost \$7,000, is guilty of not discovering it earlier than they did.

• (5:10 p.m.)

I have inquired among my colleagues in respect of the cases of overpayment they have heard of in their years in parliament and they say that from memory they do not recall anything of this magnitude ever being involved and that an overpayment of an amount up to \$1,000 would be the maximum. An amount in the neighbourhood of \$7,000, however, is completely unheard of.

In the first instance, I think there is a degree of error on the part of the Veterans Affairs administration which permitted this sort of thing to happen. I do not know what took place. I have no knowledge of the background circumstances. I have no knowledge of whether or not the declaration that there was an overpayment is correct or whether it is based on correct information. I am not going to go into that aspect.

However, from the fact that the Veterans Affairs people have said there is an overpayment of \$7,000 it seems to me that they admit their error in not discovering it much sooner