

# editorial



"And in other news, Blue Cross announced that 47 per cent of York students have used the health insurance plan to pay for drugs..."

## The sickly state of health insurance

**T**he real big health care referendum is happening south of the border. The words "Canadian-style Public Health Insurance System" have become as sexy as "Thousand Points of Light," "No New Taxes" and "Kinder, Gentler Nation" were in their heyday. The very phrase is enough to win elections in some states and sell plenty of newspapers in others.

At some point back there, somebody must have whispered: "Hey, here's something Mulroney didn't privatize or kill. It must not be communist after all." So public health insurance is becoming as American as the military-industrial complex.

But many Canadians don't seem too delighted by this development. While we normally pee our pants whenever we see the word "Canada" in a foreign publication, this development has done little more than furrow a few brows.

There's two reasons for this. One is dumb; the other is telling.

The dumb reason is straightforward: it's the old cross-border envy syndrome. OK, they've got a higher per-capita income, cheaper beer and Disneyland. On the other hand, we've got forests and lakes, 'safe' nuclear power and public health insurance. It used to be even. But now they've bought the first, debunked the second and, hey, stop talking about OHIP down there, please. We're trying to have a national identity up here.

The telling reason is, to be honest, rarely told. Here's the rub: our public health insurance system is not too healthy, and health insurance in general is getting less and less public — especially in Ontario.

It's never been terribly public (or healthy) in Ontario. In Saskatchewan, maybe. Perhaps in Quebec. But OHIP has always been paltry, the paltriest, right from the beginning. Do you know anyone with a full-time job in Ontario who doesn't pay into a private health insurance fund? You probably know lots of people *without* full-time jobs who pay for private health insurance. York students, for example.

Sure, this is not America. If you get run over by a Mack truck tomorrow, the hospital won't have to run a credit check before they admit you.

But try to get birth control pills on OHIP. Try to get insulin, lithium, penicillin, painkillers. Try to get healthy working at minimum wage, going to school, raising a child alone, living on a pension, unemployed.

It's a diabolical system: it diagnoses and prescribes, but it doesn't cure. No wonder America wants it.

Which brings us to the referendum you'll be greeted with next week. We don't want to advocate a yes or no vote: we don't know the answer either. \$132.97 is a daunting fee for any undergrad, a huge hike when we need it the least.

Moreover, if public health insurance really is a cornerstone of Canadian compassion (and we'd like to think it is), then this whole decision is an affront to our most basic values. There are enough untaxed corporations around here to foot our doctor, drug and dental bills and throw in our tuition fees to boot — with, say, a three per cent minimum corporate tax.

On the other hand, you gotta get by. The very fact that 47 per cent of undergrads took advantage of the health insurance plan last year shows we need it. We went through \$400,000 in Blue Cross bucks last year, most of it in the form of much-needed medicine.

Premier Bob isn't going to lead us to the barricades to wrench our well-being from the hands of the corporate scoundrels. In fact, he's currently chipping away at OHIP to appease those very folks with a balanced budget. "Healthy economy" becomes an oxymoron — in effect, we're paying that \$132.97 to keep our boss from moving to Mexico. And that's sick.

Christ, we know it ain't easy. We know how hard it can be. Vote no and you're left to the wiles of a public health mirage. Vote yes and you're subsidizing a free-market misery machine. It's enough to make you want to move to Sweden — and no doubt even the new centrist Swedish government is starting to weigh socialized medicine against tax breaks for multinationals.

Those envious Americans needn't turn too green. At least they're talking about building something healthy (for a change), while we're descending into the terminal illness of irreconcilable dilemmas.

D.S.

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**Wednesday November 27**

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and every Wednesday

Newswriters Meeting at 2:00 pm

**Thursday November 28**

Editorial Board Meeting at 2:00 pm

Black Writer's Caucus Meeting at 3:00 pm

Womens Caucus Meeting at 4:00 pm

General Meetings

Every Wednesday

4:30 pm

All Welcome