

Medicare

that the minister, the cabinet and the minister's officials should have the power to include extra services when in their good judgment and wisdom—assets that are lacking in the two hon. members who interjected previously—they consider the time is right. Perhaps there is a financial difficulty involved in including them at this time, but at some later date they could be included on a gradual basis. I realize there will be competition as to which should be brought in first, but I do not understand why that difficulty could not be ironed out.

Before I resume my seat, let me say that I would greatly appreciate it if the minister would outline his own feelings regarding the services to which I have referred and their importance in the area from which we both come. I ask him to do this, as one member to another, knowing that we both understand the day to day situation which exists there.

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Chairman, undoubtedly the services provided by optometrists and chiropractors are important services in the health field. There is no doubt about that and we all accept that view. As I stated earlier, with the passage of time, undoubtedly it will be possible to include these services when a consensus or agreement is reached with the provinces. We are taking a very big step in providing prepaid or insured medical services rendered by medical practitioners.

● (4:30 p.m.)

That is a big step. It is a costly step for both the federal treasury and the provinces. It will be a big job at this stage for provinces to introduce plans to provide even medical care services.

We have always stated that we would begin with physicians' services. If, at this point, we were to consider, as the hon. member suggests, bringing in further services, unless we adopted an entirely different approach it would be a question of deciding what the next service should be. Should it be dental care for children, or the provision of prescription drugs? Should it be optometric services, or should it be chiropractic services? What is the next order of priority? This is something quite important in the health field.

We have stated as a government, and I think the provinces agree, that the first order of priority is the provision of physicians' services to the Canadian population. In an ideal world it would be possible, I suppose, to bring in the whole health field. May I just mention, however, that the Hall commission did make

some comments about optometry and suggested that consideration be given in 1968 to including optometry. In the field of dental care, they set an even later target.

I think it has always been understood that we would move on a gradual basis, on a stage basis; and the first stage is the provision of insured medical services. To the extent that other health professions are not covered, of course the plan is an incomplete one. I think no one has attempted to conceal that fact. At the federal-provincial conference the Prime Minister spoke clearly and said the purpose was to provide, broadly, physicians' services with the possible exclusion of particular items. One example was given, namely, cosmetic surgery, which would not be included.

My predecessor, now the Secretary of State, had discussions with the provincial health ministers as to the possibility of optionally excluding eye refractions as an insured service. There were one or two other services discussed, but this was the principal one discussed with the provinces as a possible optional exclusion.

I can only repeat what I said earlier, that undoubtedly the services rendered by the other health professions are valuable and worthwhile. We recognize that. The fact that at this stage we are not including their services in the bill is not to be taken as any lack of appreciation for the contribution they are making to the health of the Canadian people.

Mr. Scott (Victoria (Ont.)): Mr. Chairman, I should like to address a few remarks to the minister in respect of Bill No. C-227. I received a number of letters today from people in my constituency complaining about the omission of optometrists from this bill. I represent approximately 54,000 constituents, and in my area we have four optometrists and one eye doctor. I believe, as do my constituents, that a great injustice will be perpetrated if optometrists are not included in the bill.

Many of our people who should probably have the services of an optometrist will not take care of their eyes because this service will not be an insured service. For approximately every 15,000 people, we have two optometrists. I believe optometrists should be included in the bill because so many people today are compelled to wear glasses.

I congratulate the minister upon his wider view in respect of Bill No. C-227, and hope he will see fit to include in it not only optometrists but chiropractors. This is a field of medical treatment which is becoming more popular all the time. Some of our medical