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Clement defends waiting-times strategy

Guarantee shouldn't mean delays for lower-priority surgery, he says

GLORIA GALLOWAY

OTTAWA -- Canada's Health Minister says the effort to reduce waiting times for five priority medical treatments identified by politicians should not increase queues for other procedures.

Nor should that kind of negative consequence thwart the Conservative government's attempt to make provinces introduce a waiting-times guarantee in health care, Tony Clement said yesterday in a telephone interview with The Globe and Mail.

"The worst thing that we could do is just abandon the project and say, 'It's not working because of these specific things, therefore you've got to do something else,'" Mr. Clement said. "The impact would be that we would all be stuck in a mediocre system without any hope."

Last week, The Globe and Mail spoke with doctors from a wide range of medical fields who said their patients are waiting longer because money is being directed to the five priorities established in a 2004 federal-provincial health-care accord. They include cancer care, heart operations, cataract surgery, hip and knee replacements and diagnostic imaging.

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The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons said the focus on the five specific treatments has made things worse for patients who need other procedures. Doctors who perform hysterectomies,

endoscopies and gallbladder operations all say they have less access to resources such as operating rooms, anesthetists and operating-room nurses.

The Canadian Medical Association has embarked on a study to determine just how far-reaching the problem has become.

"If you have a cataract, it is something you have to get dealt with," said Dr. Bill Paterson, president of the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology. "But should that be dealt with more quickly than someone with diarrhea who can't leave the house because they are incontinent all the time?"

Since the article appeared late last week, orthopedic surgeons have called The Globe to say that surgeries on ankles, knees, shoulders and backs are also being delayed so they can concentrate on the hip and knee replacements.

"It is a concern if that's happening," Mr. Clement said. "So I know we're going to be doing a little bit more work and the CMA is going to be doing a little bit more work to translate this anecdotal evidence to see if it is happening systemically."

When the list of priority treatments was established by the provinces and the previous Liberal government, it was always the intention to expand the benchmark waiting times beyond the original five target areas. That has yet to happen, but Mr. Clement says other medical procedures will be added to the list soon.

The Liberal timeline "was to get the next set of priorities in place in 2007. We have asked that it be accelerated to December [2006]," he said.

Increasing the list will be a topic on the agenda of a meeting between Mr. Clement and his provincial and territorial counterparts that is to take place this fall, he said.

The waiting-times guarantee was on the Conservatives' shortlist of election priorities. The federal government wants provinces to pay to send patients to other jurisdictions if treatments in the five selected areas are not available locally in a timely manner. Mr. Clement argued that money to pay for that service was included in a federal-provincial deal crafted two years ago.

The provinces counter that the guarantee was never part of that accord, and say that although they are making efforts to reduce waiting times, the federal government will have to hand over more money if it wants them to cover those types of expenses.

So although the waiting times for some procedures are being reduced in some areas of the country, only Quebec has introduced a form of guarantee for cataracts and hip and knee replacements.

Some critics, including Liberal MP Ruby Dhalla, accuse Mr. Clement of downloading all responsibility for waiting times onto the provinces without providing the resources to complete the goals. And because progress has been so slow, Ms. Dhalla said she believes the government is abandoning its health-care promises.

"Of all of the five priorities that they continue to talk about," she said, "they regularly omit health care."

But Mr. Clement said the waiting-times guarantee has not dropped off his government's agenda.

"We always said -- the Prime Minister and myself -- that this was a different priority than some of the others because it was in a different domain. It would take collaboration and co-operation with the provinces and territories," he said.

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