

## First private primary health care centre decried

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Canadian Press

*Tuesday, November 22, 2005*

VANCOUVER -- Canada's first private primary health care centre opened its doors Monday as critics said it is an elitist members-only club aimed at bringing American-style medicine to this country. 

The Copeman Healthcare Centre offers patients "unhurried" appointments with family doctors and quick access to in-house specialists for an enrolment fee of \$1,200 and an annual charge of \$2,300.

Don Copeman, 47, who founded the clinic, said his model of primary care will allow doctors to give patients more time and extensive diagnostic and screening facilities without the long waits they would face in the public system.

Some services would be covered under the Medical Services Plan and others would not, Copeman said, adding patients would also have access to education, counselling and nutrition experts.

Health Services Minister George Abbott said he's concerned that some aspects of Copeman's clinic aren't complying with the Canada Health Act or the province's Medicare Protection Act because he may be charging for insured services.

"From our perspective some of the ways in which the clinic is represented on his website and in his advertising still raise issues about whether in fact he is in compliance with those statutes," Abbott said.

"The promotional material would suggest that somehow people would get preferred access to Canada Health Act insured services by registering with the clinic. That is of continuing concern to us."

The issue of public versus private health care was also raised Monday by Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, who said in a speech in Ottawa that the matter must be front and centre in the next federal election campaign.

Klein said the public health-care system is the No. 1 problem facing Canadians but one that too many politicians don't want to talk about.

Copeman said he's not violating the Canada Health Act and that his group of 16 doctors - with an even split of family physicians and specialists in fields such as cancer and cardiology - are equipped to provide better care for people who are willing to pay for it.

He said his clinic is unique compared to any other facility in the world and that he hopes to open 37 such private centres across the country in the next five years.

"We're basically trying to bring the concept of specialized co-operative medicine to primary care because we believe that it's the way that the public health-care system in Canada will ultimately be saved," he said.

All the family doctors in the clinic also have expertise in areas such as women's health and cancer, Copeman said, so patients don't have to be referred to specialists as often as those who provide "hurried" care in the public system.

"Canada is becoming increasingly embarrassed on a global stage for its waiting lists. It's just an unacceptable situation for most people and we believe the solution to it is long-term primary health care renewal."

Copeman, who wouldn't reveal the number of patients that have registered at his clinic, said he sees nothing wrong with providing services to people who can afford them.

"If someone can afford to pay for programs that have never really been available in Canada before they're more healthy as a result and they enter hospitals less often and have less of a burden on the specialist community."

But Dr. Michael Golbey, president of the B.C. Medical Association, said he's concerned that Copeman's clinic is taking the small pool of doctors out of the public system and making them available to those who have the money to pay for their services.

"Overall, it's a symptom of a huge problem that we have, that is the access to care," Golbey said.

Debra McPherson, president of the B.C. Nurses' Union, echoed Golbey's concerns, adding that primary care that provides preventative care should be available to everyone.

NDP health critic David Cuskerley said he's wondering why the Liberal government allowed Copeman to open his clinic if the health minister is so

concerned about violations of the Canada Health Act.

"It's preferential access to care," Cubberley said.

"What this is is foot-in-two-camps medicine and it will undermine health care in Canada.

"The minister wants to treat it as an issue at the margin and it's not an issue at the margin. It's an issue that runs right to the core, the basic values of the system and it has never been tolerated around primary care."

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