

BORDER WARS: PRESCRIPTION DRUGS FROM CANADA

Canada struggles, despite reputation

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OTTAWA -- Soaring health costs causing government to skimp on other public services. Expensive new prescription medicines increasingly out of reach for many. Huge disparities nationwide in the availability of health services and citizens' health status.

The state of health care in the United States? Actually, in Canada. Hard to believe, but true.

Many Americans who have long been envious of their northern neighbor for its "single-payer" universal health system probably would be stunned to hear that Canada faces just as many problems as the U.S. "free-market" system. But Canadian government and private health officials acknowledge their system's struggle with rising costs and access to care.

"We still have many of the same problems as the United States," said Elinor Wilson, chief executive officer of the Canadian Public Health Association in Ottawa. "Just insuring all of your population is not sufficient to change people's health status."

To be sure, Canada's overall drug prices are lower than in the U.S., which has resulted in many Americans' buying drugs from Canadian pharmacies. But are Canadians really better off under their health system? Consider:

* Canada doesn't have a national "single-payer" system in which one government entity pays for and controls health care for all its citizens. Instead, Canada's 10 provinces and two territories are responsible for providing health services to their residents; the level of benefits varies by region. Citizens in the richer provinces such as Alberta and Ontario get more benefits than those in poorer regions such as Nova Scotia. Canada's system is so splintered even the type of vaccines children get differs by province, and prescriptions are good only in the province written.

* Canada doesn't have a national pharmacy benefit for all its citizens. More than half of Canadians get prescription coverage from employers. Even most of the smallest employers provide some drug benefits. Like the U.S., Canada has a national drug plan called Medicare that provides drug benefits to seniors 65 and over. Provinces also provide some drug benefits to low-income residents. About 5 percent of Canadians have no drug coverage.

* Despite providing health insurance to its residents, Canada has the same daunting public health problems as America, including high tobacco use, obesity and illegal drug use. Only after the deadly 2003 SARS outbreak, which killed 44 Canadians and sent 10,000 Toronto residents into quarantine, did the government look into establishing a national agency akin to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It is important to note that the U.S. has more uninsured residents - 45 million - than Canada has total population - about 30 million. And nearly 90 percent of Canadians live less than a two-hour drive from the U.S., giving them the ability to visit American doctors and hospitals, if they can afford it.

Canadians face long waits to get medical care. Median wait times were four weeks to see a specialist, 4.3 weeks for nonemergency surgery and three weeks for diagnostic tests, according to a recent government study.

About 25 percent of Canadians wait one to three months for cancer or heart surgery, and about 31 percent wait that long for diagnostic tests such as MRIs. Waits also vary by region.

Even with its health-care problems, Canada still has one of the longest life expectancies in the world: 79.4 years. Life expectancy in the United States is 76.8 years.

While the level of health services matters, public health officials say genetics, lifestyle and nutrition often account for big differences in lifespan.

About 88 percent of Canadian and 85 percent of Americans say they are in good, very good or excellent health, according to a recently released joint study by both nations.

Acknowledging that Canadians and Americans are generally in about the same health, Canadian health officials point out possibly the biggest difference between the countries' health systems: Last year, Canada spent \$121.4 billion on health care, an average of \$3,839 a person. The United States spent more than \$1.7 trillion, about \$5,500 a person.

So as Canada debates how to reform its health system to cut costs and expand access, health officials are reticent to adopt the American model.

"At least we have a health system that doesn't bankrupt you if you get sick," said Chris Mills, president of the Canadian Public Health Association.

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