

Private cancer clinic opens

Costs start at \$2,500: Patients receive counselling, their own records but not treatment

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A clinic set to open today is offering what its operators call a private-medicine first in Canada -- intensive care, counselling and portable electronic health records specifically for fee-paying cancer patients.

The physician couple behind Medicor Cancer say they will provide the kind of comprehensive aid in dealing with the disease and the health care system that many cancer patients cannot get now.

Clients will have to pay at least \$2,500, but the physicians say any medically necessary services will be charged to the medicare system, as legally required.

It is the latest twist in the growing field of private health care, and the Ontario government says it will watch the clinic closely to ensure it abides by the law.

The doctors opening Medicor say they would be happy to see the province pay for the sort of services they will offer. In the meantime, patients have a right to pay for them, they argue.

"If I'm sick and I want something, I don't want the government to tell me what I can spend my money on," said Dr. Humaira Khan, a public-health physician and Medicor president. "If it's my life or the life of someone I love, I want to be able to control what treatment I want, where I want it, whether I pay for it or not."

"Is it fair that the system forces mediocrity on every citizen?" asked her husband, Dr. Akbar Khan, the clinic's medical director and a family physician.

Medicor will not provide actual cancer treatment such as chemotherapy, radiation or surgery.

Patients will have an initial consultation with a physician, which could last as long as two hours, to discuss all aspects of their condition. That will be followed by visits with any two out of a team of five other health professionals, including a dietician, massage therapist, naturopathic doctor, physiotherapist and health counsellor.

Clients will also receive their own hand-held computer device on which all their medical records will be stored. Patients can take it wherever they go and to any health care facility, whether it has computer access to the Internet or not.

Dr. Akbar Khan noted the Ontario government has been working for years on an electronic health-record system that would be Internet-based, but that has yet to come to fruition. His system is based on software he and an IT consultant developed over the past several months.

Medicor will also provide help in setting up appointments, arranging for nursing care, creating living wills, applying for government aid and other tasks faced by those battling cancer. Patients must deal with a bewildering array of medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, surgeons and other specialists, Dr. Humaira Khan said.

"They kind of feel unsupported in this most critical time of their life," she said.

After they have exhausted the initial, one-time service, patients can subscribe for ongoing care -- at a cost of \$1,200 a month -- including unlimited telephone access to a doctor as well as regular appointments with a physician and other health professionals.

Medicor is the latest in a recent string of proposed private clinics in Ontario, where the province has been generally hostile to the idea. Dr. Brian Day, a pioneer of for-profit medicine in British Columbia, has plans to open private surgery centres, while Don Copeman, another B.C. doctor, wants to set up private family-practice offices.

David Spencer, a spokesman for George Smitherman, the Ontario Health Minister, said it is against the law for any private clinic to charge for medically necessary services. If a clinic such as Medicor offers a block fee, patients must be allowed to get just medically necessary services from the doctor without paying for anything else, he said.

The Health Ministry audits such clinics to ensure they follow the rules, he said. "The proof is in the pudding."

Dr. Akbar Khan said patients will still be able to see him through the medicare system without joining the private clinic.

However, the clinic's brochure says the medicare-covered free services and the private services are "intimately related" so the doctors "are unable to separate them."

Dr. Michael Rachlis, a prominent health policy analyst and defender of public health care, said he cannot blame cancer patients if they feel a need for such private care. But he said the real solution is for the public system to fill those gaps.

That is already happening in some provinces, Dr. Rachlis said. Both Quebec and Nova Scotia have what are called "nurse navigators" who guide cancer sufferers through the often-complex system, he said.

For the past several years, Dr. Khan's practice has involved caring for terminal patients, mostly suffering from cancer, in their own homes under the public system. He said it was their frustrations that suggested to him a service such as Medicor was needed.

Dr. Khan said he would continue to do his medicare-funded house calls for terminal patients even after opening the private clinic.

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