

We have great health care

by BRIAN LOCKHART

When it comes to health care in Ontario, we like to complain ? a lot.

We complain about wait times, delayed surgery, and having too few doctors. Just about everything in the system is open for criticism.

You hear a lot more complaints than compliments.

That's just the way we are. As the late former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said, 'Canada is a nation of whiners.'

Sorry, but it's true.

Every experience I've had with the health care system in Ontario has been positive.

From my own injuries due to a few sports and work related accidents, which weren't all that bad, to major health concerns with family members, I've always been impressed with the care and the way our hospitals work.

The last time I needed some help, for a minor injury, I went into the ER on the advice of a panicky neighbour who saw my rather swollen knee and exclaimed his friend had the same condition, and lost his leg to amputation after not having it looked at.

I had some blood work done, met with a doctor, and was in and out in less than three hours. That's pretty good service.

Turns out it was nothing serious and I managed to keep my appendage intact.

I had no idea who the doctor on-call was already seeing. Maybe the person ahead of me was in serious trouble and needed urgent care a lot more than I did.

Three hours out of your week when you need some help is not a lot of time.

Our socialized health care system is working quite well.

However, the path to get where we are wasn't a smooth 20th century transition to a happy 'free health care' system that we now enjoy, and it took a long time to achieve.

Quite often we look smugly at our American neighbours and wonder why the most powerful country on earth, is the only modern western nation that doesn't have socialized health care.

We've all heard stories about someone in the U.S. having a serious illness that resulted in them losing their home, savings, and eventually declaring bankruptcy because they simply couldn't pay the medical fees, which can easily reach into the six figure range or even higher if you are in a hospital for an extended period of time.

For some reason, Americans just can't get on-board with socialized medicine. They seem to see it as some kind of communist plot.

The path to socialized medicine in Canada was a very rocky road that we have seemingly forgotten about.

When the idea of starting a provincial or national health care system was first floated around back in the early part of the last

century, it was not met with a lot of enthusiasm from some groups.

A poll was conducted in 1949 asking citizens how they would vote on a government-funded health care system, in which they would contribute to financially, there was a favourable response by 80 per cent of those who responded, however the system was firmly opposed by doctors, insurance companies, and some big business outfits for various reasons.

Saskatchewan Premier at the time, Tommy Douglas championed the cause.

Douglas was injured as a child and nearly lost his leg. A well known orthopedic surgeon took interest and agreed to treat him for free if his parents allowed medical students to observe.

Later in life, Douglas said, "I felt that no boy should have to depend either for his leg or his life upon the ability of his parents to raise enough money to bring a first-class surgeon to his bedside."

The introduction of medicare did not come easily. The Canadian Medical Association at the time opposed all publicly funded health care.

When Saskatchewan forged ahead with a program for universal medical insurance, medical doctors in that province actually went on strike to oppose it and try to force the government to back down.

Around 90 per cent of the province's doctors closed their offices with warnings that doctors would leave the province if socialized medicine were introduced.

Apparently the fact that doctors would go on strike and leave citizens without medical care didn't sit well with residents of Saskatchewan.

An anonymous group actually threatened the doctors with physical harm if they didn't get back on the job.

Prior to socialized health care in Canada, doctors charged whatever they wanted for their services.

And just like in the U.S., people claiming bankruptcy was a common result for people trying to pay medical bills. In the long run, it has worked out.

Doctors are not living in the poor house as they feared.

The insurance companies will always come out ahead, and the leaders of big business carry a health card like everyone else.