

Health care cuts for refugees wrong

Dear editor:

Canada has long been a safe haven for those seeking protection from violence and persecution in troubled parts of the world, but our reputation for compassion has been called into question by the Conservative government's decision to deny refugee claimants health care. Since 1957, the federal government has provided health coverage to refugees arriving in Canada, many of whom are among the most vulnerable people in the world. Two years ago Minister Jason Kenney ended this compassionate practice, forcing doctors to deny coverage to some of the people in the greatest need. The human toll has been considerable. Refugees, most of whom will become Canadian residents, who can't access care typically delay seeking treatment until their conditions worsen. That leads to undiagnosed and untreated problems, greater health complications and higher costs to the health care system when they eventually arrive for treatment in emergency centres. This downloads costs to already cash-strapped provincial governments, and shifts care to Emergency rooms, which are the most expensive way to deliver health care. But worst of all, denying the initial care creates preventable suffering among the most vulnerable. The impact on pregnancies is particularly heart-wrenching. In many cases refugees' newborns are premature, underdeveloped, with neurological problems and other complications because their mothers couldn't get prenatal care. These newborns, who are Canadian by birth, will end up costing our health and education systems much more. It's no wonder virtually every medical organization in Canada was outraged at these cuts and the medical community has held annual rallies opposing them since they were announced. The Federal Court recently agreed, striking down the cut because it 'puts [refugee claimants'] lives at risk, and perpetuates the stereotypical view that they are cheats, that their refugee claims are 'bogus'. It undermines their dignity and serves to perpetuate [their] disadvantage.' The cuts to refugee health care have always been morally wrong and fiscally short-sighted. The Conservatives must drop their appeal to the Federal Court ruling and reverse the cuts.

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