

Ontario sees no threat in private care –

Health Minister says new Toronto clinics nothing out of the ordinary.

Two Toronto clinics that have started selling expensive cancer treatments not covered by OHIP are no threat to the province's public health system, Health Minister George Smitherman said yesterday.

"People are accessing services all the time in Ontario that are not provided within the public benefits, so there can't be any offence there," Mr. Smitherman said.

"Where it becomes offensive is where people are accessing benefits that are part of the public health care system faster just because of the breadth of their wallet."

A private clinic set to open in Toronto next month will offer cancer patients up to a half-dozen expensive new drugs that are not currently funded through the public system.

The available drugs include Herceptin, a breakthrough breast cancer drug that can cost up to \$45,000 a year, and Velcade, which can be used to prolong life for people with multiple myeloma, a deadly blood cancer. Velcade costs \$35,000 per treatment cycle.

In another private-sector cancer treatment initiative, a private facility licensed by the Ontario Ministry of Health announced in May that it will offer prostate cancer patients a new high-intensity ultrasound treatment that is also not covered by the province. The cost of the treatment at the Don Mills Surgical Unit is \$17,288.

The Don Mills clinic, one of only a few for-profit surgical units that was allowed to continue private operations in Ontario after the public health care system was introduced, had until now limited its operations to plastic surgery and provincially funded cataract and orthopedic services.

Mr. Smitherman recently came under fire from the Conservative opposition when he approved the transfer of the private hospital's licence to new private-sector owners, the Alegro Health Corp.

Conservative MPP John Yakabuski accused Mr. Smitherman and the Liberals of drifting aimlessly on the health care file.

"His quotes [in the past] would indicate he is opposed to any private health care in Ontario, but every time something like [these private clinics] presents itself, he fudges. They've boxed themselves into a corner, and when a situations arises, they don't seem to be able to deal with it."

Mr. Smitherman insisted there's already a "tremendous body of medical service that is provided outside the public domain." He speculated the attention devoted to the latest private-sector offerings is the result of the recent Supreme Court ruling on private health insurance in Quebec.

Discussion about which patients with deep pockets should or should not be able to purchase was also highlighted this week when Alberta Premier Ralph Klein outlined his "Third Way" of health care.

He highlighted options that include allowing patients to pay out of pocket for private and semi-private hospital rooms and for state-of-the-art hip replacements.

Hospital-room upgrades, which range from \$170 to \$275 for semi-private and private rooms depending on the institution, have been available for years in Ontario.

Higher-end hip replacements cannot be purchased by big spenders, said Dr. Ted Rumble, an orthopedic surgeon at North York General.

"The surgeon's responsibility is to choose the correct prosthesis for each patient, and that's what we do," he said, noting some patients may require the more expensive joint while others do well with less costly options. "To my mind, patients have not suffered."

Ontario patients can, however, buy other sorts of upgrades. They can pay, for instance, for lighter, waterproof casts instead of making do with the standard plaster ones offered for broken bones.