Canada Targets Shorter Surgical Waiting Lists

Alberta Health Services will spend $8 million over the next six weeks to reduce surgical waiting times, especially those on hold for urgent cancer surgeries and hip and knee replacements. Although health services also announced plans to increase the number of surgeries, MRIs, CT scans and cataract procedures by 10 percent over the next year, health critics said the plan is a short-term fix that moves the province towards more private delivery of health care.

With $8 million in savings found by Alberta Health Services, doctors, nurses and other medical staff will perform approximately 2,230 more surgeries and 3,500 more MRI and CT scans between now and March 31. About 114,000 in-patient procedures, which does not include diagnostic tests, endoscopies or cataracts, are done each year in Alberta. To ensure more operations are performed, hours will be extended and part-time or casual staff will be asked to pick up more hours.

While waiting times will go down, many are concerned some of the $8 million is set aside for 750 cataract procedures to be done in private facilities in Calgary under contract with health services. In comparison, the Royal Alexandra Hospital will do 175 more cataract surgeries in the next six weeks. While 37 more hip, knee and joint replacements will be performed at the Royal Alex and University hospitals in Edmonton, Calgary's privately operated Health Resource Centre will do 180 more hip and knee procedures for the public system.

Some feel these are signs that the government is abandoning public delivery of health care and looking to more private medical providers. This program comes almost one year after health services began limiting overtime for staff in an effort to deal with a $1.3-billion deficit that has since been covered by the government.

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