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BC HEALTH COALITION

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For-profit emergency care: Health Coalition demands immediate audit of False Creek Surgical Centre

Letter to health minister calls on government to uphold principle that health care is available to everyone based on medical need, not ability to pay

The BC Health Coalition is calling on the provincial government to launch an immediate investigation of billing practices at Vancouver's False Creek Surgical Centre in light of the re-opening of its patient-pay "urgent care."

In a letter to Health Minister George Abbott, the Coalition demands that government use the powers it assumed when it proclaimed sections of Bill 92 last December in response to False Creek's last attempt to bill patients directly for emergency services.

The letter asks the government to investigate the medical business' operations and billing procedures to determine whether they comply with both BC's *Medicare Protection Act* and the *Canada Health Act*.

"Our public health care in BC and across Canada is based on the principle that medical services are available to everyone equally based on medical need, not on ability to pay," says Joyce Jones, BC Health Coalition co-chair.

"The model promoted by the False Creek Surgical Centre appears to violate this principle and sends us down the road to US-style health care where those with higher credit card limits or better health insurance get better care."

The Coalition is urging the health minister to exercise the provisions of Bill 92 to their full extent to enforce the *Canada Health Act* in BC.

The letter to the Minister points out that the federal legislation specifically prohibits user charges for medically necessary services that are insured under medicare.

"The clinic's claim that its doctors that provide "urgent care" are not enrolled in medicare is irrelevant," the letter states. "Under the Canada Health Act, if a patient needs a service that's insured under medicare and the patient is covered by medicare, a physician or clinic has no right to charge fees."

"Just because the federal government has turned a blind eye to similar violations in Quebec is no excuse for inaction. Politicians, even if they're cabinet ministers, can't pick and choose which laws to enforce and which to ignore," notes Colleen Fuller, health researcher.

The letter also asks Abbott for an investigation to determine whether False Creek continues to charge patients referred to it by practitioners a facility fee. In its annual report of 2003-04, Health Canada noted that the billing practices of BC's private surgical clinics, including False Creek, had been the subject of on-going discussions between the two levels of government since June 2000.

"It's time for the provincial and federal government to demonstrate their commitment to medicare and the right of patients to receive timely medical care without being forced to pay extra fees," says Fuller.

"It's also time for the BC government to build on the successes of many positive public solutions to health care challenges, such as the innovative public surgical projects which have reduced waiting times significantly in public facilities."