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Prescription for healthcare

Plan sponsors and plan members alike are speaking out about the future of healthcare. Three different surveys recently weighed in on the private/public healthcare debate.

The first is the *2006 Mercer Survey*, which showed that 60% of Canadian companies have not yet reviewed the terms of their

employee benefit plans and their contractual obligations. And according to Brian Lindenberg, principal and leader of the health and benefits professional group at Mercer Human Resource Consulting in Edmonton, plan sponsors are even more worried now that provincial governments have been looking at private insurance. "A lot of it was driven by the court decision in the province of Quebec but also [by] Alberta's Third Way. Taken together, there are two provinces that might be moving into the realm of more private insurance."

At this point, says Lindenberg, plan sponsors are just beginning to look at their "documentation" and ensuring their plans are protected from direct or indirect cost shifts. He says employers must tell members that even though a plan looks a certain way today, it may not necessarily cover expenses that have been downloaded from the province in the future.

The flipside of the coin is employees' perception of the healthcare they are receiving. Addressing these issues is the *sanofi-aventis Healthcare Survey*. Chris Bonnett, a member of the survey advisory board and president of H3 Consulting/businesshealth in Toronto, says the survey shows 57% of workers think a private/parallel health insurance system would have a positive impact on their employer. "You could conclude that employees may see a private/parallel system as offsetting an employer liability," he says.

A third survey from the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) shows that Canadians want faster, cheaper services but do not necessarily want a parallel system. Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai, president of the CMA in Ottawa, notes that "Canadians recognize that the 'quo' has no status when it comes to our current system, but they also recognize that two-tier healthcare is not the way they want to go."

Based on these surveys, while governments decide what steps to take, some provinces, such as Alberta and Quebec, are taking action on healthcare. The issue now becomes what form of parallel private/public system will exist in the future, and how much the public will be willing to pay for it. —Joel Kranc

"I don't see [flex plans] as anything but less coverage for people. It's like a choice between hanging or shooting yourself."

—Buzz Hargrove, national president, Canadian Auto Workers, Toronto



A HEALTHY DOSE

Three new surveys on the state of healthcare in Canada are out. Each has a unique perspective on the perceptions of plan sponsors, plan members and general end-users of healthcare services. The highlights:

2006 Mercer Survey

- 11% of Canadian companies have done a full audit and are protected against cost-shifting from the provinces.
- 7% are making changes to their benefits plans to protect themselves from unintended cost-shifting from the provinces.
- If private health insurance is offered by employers, 39% of companies would consider including it as an option on an employee-pay-all basis.
- 14% would consider including it as an option on a cost-shared basis.

sanofi-aventis Healthcare Survey

- 47% of respondents say they have waited too long to be seen at hospital emergencies in the past couple of years.
- 47% of respondents agree they would be interested in paying personally for extra health coverage through their employer.
- 60% of people say their health benefit plan has stayed the same in the past five years.
- 51% of Canadians strongly agree and 64% somewhat agree they are content with their health plans, and feel others should have the same type of plan.

Canadian Medical Association

- When asked about a system that would offer both a care guarantee and a public health insurance plan, 81% say they would prefer such a system, followed by 72% who would want a plan complemented with medicare; 64% are happy with the status quo and 51% would like a medicare-plus-private option.