

Time for health care to be political

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Canadians have never really made medicine a true debate point at election time. We have been proud — and rightly so — of our public health system. There has been some debate about private health care and how we do not need it, but that was so 2019. The holes in the system were already showing then, but most physicians were living and coping with that reality. The current reality of wait lists in the COVID-19 era is going to knock the system on its can. We in the profession know how badly the system has functioned during the pandemic, and now we are seeing the remnants of emergent adjustments. In surgery, the system is now a dike that is bursting at the seams. Surgical wait lists are out of control. Time to referral and time to treatment wait lists are not factual. Most surgeons were unable to see patients in referral during the first 2 years of the pandemic, so the T0 times are underreported. Elective backlogs of years are now the norm. The lists we have are the tips of icebergs. The real wait lists are going to change health care functionality. Something fundamental needs to change nationwide. How can we communicate this to the population at large? We have relied on the media to pass on important points in the past and on elected officials to champion health care for Canada. I am beginning to wonder whether they are the right people for us to rely on.

This point is driven home for me because I am writing this while on a trek with my son. We are travelling down Route 66 across the heartland of the United States. During the trip, we have listened to the news a fair amount between country music stations. It is startling the way that the news is reported, and it has changed tone as the trip has progressed from the Midwest to the West. What I thought were obvious truths and not debatable are completely changed under the spectrum of the press here. I wonder what the reality of this realization in relation to Canadian reporting is. We will have to accept that the visions of politics and the free press in Canada may not be too different from those in the US, if — at least, we hope — not as dichotomous.

This leads to the crux of the issue: Who is giving the appropriate message to the public for our patients? If we really want the politics of medicine to be front and centre in the next election, we will need to tell the story ourselves. Relying on other people to tell our story may not

work. It has not worked so well in the past. The Canadian people should not have to suffer because we feel we should not get involved as we are supposedly apolitical. It is better we tell our message clearly with our own voice. If the Canadian population is going to realize what is happening in health care, perhaps the people they respect the most should tell those stories. According to polls in Canada¹ and a similar one published in *Forbes*,² nurses, doctors, pharmacists and scientists are in the top 6 trustworthy professions. Numbers in the US are similar,² with more than 80 % of the population respecting scientists, nurses and doctors. What are the least respected professions? Politicians and social media influencers. In Canada, journalists are in the bottom half of respected trades, with social media influencers and elected members of parliament at or near the bottom of the respect scale.¹ So, if we want change and if we want the population to see the reason for change, we need to stop relying on politicians and journalists. We need to carry our own banner and change how our patients are treated. It cannot be allowed to be worse than it is now.

Edward J. Harvey, MD, MSc

Affiliation: From the Department of Surgery, McGill University, Montréal, Que.; Coeditor-in-chief, *C7S*.

Competing interests: E.J. Harvey is the cofounder and head of medical innovation of NXTSens Inc.; the cofounder and chief medical officer of MY01 Inc. and Sensia Diagnostics Inc.; and the cofounder and director of Strathera Inc. He receives institutional support from J & J DePuy Synthes, Stryker, MY01 and Zimmer.

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Cite as: *Can J Surg* 2022 August 25;65(4). doi: 10.1503/cjs.010522

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