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## Governments take a hit as CMA releases report card

The CMA's first-ever report card on the state of Canadian health care is out, and politicians won't be rushing to show voters the results.

The card, based on a national telephone survey of 1500 adults, gives provincial governments an F and the federal government a C for their management of the health care system; health care providers score a B.

One mark left doctors scratching their heads when the report card was released Aug. 13 during the CMA's annual meeting in Quebec City. Respondents gave the system an A for access to family physicians, and several doctors complained that the mark was misleading because in many communities thousands of residents have no FP. Even Federal Health Minister Allan Rock referred to the shortage when he addressed General Council, saying that 40 000 residents of Windsor, Ont., currently have no family doctor.

"The A surprised us," acknowledged then CMA President Peter Barrett, "but the reality is that once you get into the system the service is good and the satisfaction rate is high." He said doctors who challenged the grade are probably the same ones who made the high mark possible. "They are the ones working 12 hours a day to keep the system going."

The report card, which is to be an annual affair, was based on responses from a weighted sample of Canadians from all parts of the country. Respondents' main message was directed at politicians. "Canadians are most negative in their assessment of government performance," the card says. "Only 5% of respondents give the federal government's performance a very positive rating — an A; six times as many give federal performance a failing grade. Similarly, only 6% think [their] provincial government is doing a very good job, while fully 35% give their provincial government a failing grade."

Still, at least 6 of 10 respondents give the system at least a B in terms of overall quality, choice of health services and most recent interaction with the system; only 9% gave it a failing grade. The survey used to determine the grades had a margin of error of  $\pm 2.6\%$ , 19 times out of 20.

Barrett said Canadians shouldn't be misled by the relatively high overall mark. "There is still a sense that the system is in decline and that this decline is a major problem."

Rock, who recently had prostate cancer surgery, declined to grade the health care system himself, but added: "People who use the system rate it highly."

Rock covered a lot of bases during the meeting, but there was little question that smoking — of both tobacco and marijuana — attracted much of the attention. And it was also clear that he had strong MD support for the former but some strong opposition to the latter.

Rock, making his fifth appearance at

from physicians. I concede that we're breaking new ground, but I think it is the right thing to do."

One doctor said the move will encourage drug abuse, but Rock responded that the same argument could be applied to morphine, which has a long association with medical care but is also abused by addicts. "I don't know of any arguments against using morphine because some people abuse it."

Barrett said physicians' main concern is that they have been made "the gatekeeper" for an unproven drug. One critic, Ontario Medical Association President Kenneth Sky, argued that Rock had not told "the whole story" about medical marijuana.

But physicians had nothing but praise for Rock's decision to ban the use of deceptive "light" and "mild" designations on cigarette packages. He said these cigarettes are as lethal as regular brands, have the same ingredients and cause smokers to inhale the same amount of toxic materials. He expects a court challenge from the tobacco industry, but said the government would push ahead. "Make no mistake. There is nothing light or mild about the lies of big tobacco."

Barrett said the CMA strongly supports the move: "We don't think there is any such thing as light cigarettes."

Rock also said skyrocketing drug costs might eventually force Ottawa to move beyond the issues of efficacy and safety when considering new drugs, and look at cost-effectiveness as well. He said his department might have to consider whether a marginal improvement offered by a new drug warrants its higher price tag. Rock is worried that his department has been approving new drugs "in blissful isolation" from economic realities. — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*



the annual meeting, did not raise the medical marijuana issue in his speech but he offered a spirited defence of it when challenged from the floor. Criticized for giving marijuana medical status without any scientific evidence, Rock responded: "We're acting out of compassion based on anecdotal evidence, including some