

WHEELCHAIR FEES IN RESIDENTIAL CARE FACILITIES

BC Legislature Debate

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A. Dix: Last month we learned the Fraser Health Authority will begin charging the Premier's \$300-a-year wheelchair tax on vulnerable seniors in residential care, taking advantage of a government policy change that enabled the tax. Today we learn that not only did the government enable the new tax on vulnerable seniors, it actually made it happen. A Fraser Health briefing note obtained through freedom of information shows: "The Ministry of Health requested Fraser Health to implement wheelchair maintenance fees."

Can the Minister of Health confirm that in fact it was on the ministry's instructions that Fraser Health decided to charge this uncaring tax, and can he further confirm if the ministry asked other health authorities to do the same?

Hon. T. Lake: I would remind the member opposite that British Columbia currently spends \$1.7 billion every year to subsidize the province's comprehensive residential care and assisted-living services. That is an increase of \$600 million in the last 12 years.

While residential care is a person's home, and while the public health system covers the cost of medical and health care needs, residents pay for the cost of their personal equipment and supplies just as they would if they lived in the community, as I explained during estimates debate yesterday.

But I will say this. No vulnerable senior citizen will be denied a service if they cannot afford a particular equipment or aid in a publicly subsidized residential care space in the province of British Columbia.

Madame Speaker: Leader of the Opposition on a supplemental.

A. Dix: When this wheelchair tax was announced — and I guess the minister may be arguing it's not a medical or health care need — the government blamed the health authorities. They said: "It's the health authorities that did this. It wasn't us; it's the health authorities." Oh, not all of the government said that. The Premier said it's something that's done by almost all the health authorities in the province and had been done for a while, which would have been a better defence, except all the facts contained within it are wrong.

In fact, we know that the very briefing note says that residents were to be informed by April 1. We know that this did not happen. Conveniently for the government, no one knew about the tax until after the election.

Fraser Health said that the decision to impose the wheelchair tax — in the document — was made after discussions that began in late 2012, presumably after Fraser Health got its marching orders. Can the minister tell this House when the decision was finalized, and can he tell the House — a very simple question — did the government order the other health authorities to do the same thing?

Hon. T. Lake: This is a chargeable fee that is allowed under the regulations in British Columbia. There was a patchwork of approaches across the province.

If there was a non-profit-owned and -operated facility, they may charge a fee. If there was a private facility that had publicly funded beds, they charge

British Columbia. There was a patchwork of approaches across the province. If there was a non-profit-owned and -operated facility, they may charge a fee. If there was a private facility that had publicly funded beds, the residents were expected to have their own wheelchairs. In the health-authority-owned and -operated beds, again there was a patchwork of approaches.

The ministry sat down with health authorities and said: "We need a consistent approach to make sure that all residential care patients are being treated equally and fairly across the province of British Columbia." We are working with the health authorities to make sure there is clear communication with residents and their families about the allowable charges.

But I repeat: no one, that is unable to pay a wheelchair fee will pay a wheelchair fee in British Columbia.

Madame Speaker: Leader of the Opposition on a supplemental.

A. Dix: The minister should know that the government enabled the health authorities to do this in 2010. The health authorities decided not to do it on their own because it's a lousy and unfair idea. In fact, the very briefing note, the very assessment that was obtained through FOI, rated this decision minus 13, which admittedly is better than minus 14, but I don't think it's very good. In fact, what the Fraser Health Authority says is it's the very reason they didn't do this until the government made them do it.

It's very simple. The question is actually a very simple factual question. Has the government ordered other health authorities to do this? They enabled it in 2010. The health authorities decided the government had a lousy idea, and then the government made them do it after the election.

It's a very simple question to the minister. It's a lousy idea. Why doesn't he walk it back? And can he tell us if he ordered the other health authorities to do the same thing?

Hon. T. Lake: I will tell the opposition leader what we have done. What we have done since 2001 is build 5,000 long-term residential and assisted living spaces in the province of British Columbia. The member opposite would suggest that it is fair for someone living in the community to pay for their mobility aids and that someone in a publicly subsidized facility should not have to.

We are about fairness, and we are about consistency, which is why we have worked with the health authorities to ensure that there is clear communication with patients and their families. Every one of them has a policy that if the patient cannot afford the rental fee on a wheelchair, it will be waived.

K. Conroy: Sometime in late 2012 the government told Fraser Health to begin charging this uncaring wheelchair tax. But it also made sure that no word of its plans came out until after the election, squelching Fraser Health's plans to announce the new tax on April 1, 2013. How fair is that? Now it blames health authorities for the decision.

Let's be clear. This was the government's decision, the government's directive. It's all there in Fraser Health's briefing note. To the Minister of Health: when will he admit that this is the government's plan, that all along it was going to force health authorities to charge this uncaring \$300-a-year wheelchair tax, and when will he reverse that decision and withdraw the tax?

Hon. T. Lake: To the member opposite, we canvassed this yesterday in estimates, so I know she has heard the answer. There has always been the ability to charge for wheelchair maintenance fees for publicly funded beds at residential care facilities. As it turned out, there was a patchwork of approaches which was patently unfair to some residents of long-term residential care facilities.

The ministry worked with the health authorities, and there is a fact sheet on our website which demonstrates what are the allowable fees. Every health authority has a policy in place to ensure that if a family cannot afford the fee to service a wheelchair — which is important. These wheelchairs are used from one patient to another patient. Following their use they have to be maintained; they have to be disinfected. If they cannot afford that wheelchair fee, it will be waived in every case.

Madame Speaker: Member for Kootenay West on a supplemental.

K. Conroy: Beds have to be disinfected too. Are they going to be next to be charged in this province?

In February of 2012, the Ombudsperson released part 2 of her report on seniors. She made hundreds of recommendations, one of which was not to raise fees for seniors. Despite this recommendation, the government instructed Fraser Health to impose this uncaring tax on vulnerable seniors in the residential care.

How can the minister justify ignoring the Ombudsperson's recommendations? Will he admit he is callously adding unnecessary hardship to vulnerable seniors? Seniors in the province deserve better.

Hon. T. Lake: It is the fact that a person living in the community, if they need a mobility device, has to pay for their mobility device unless they are on assistance from the province of British Columbia. The member opposite would say that we have to pay for every mobility device in the province.

What we do is that if someone is in publicly funded long-term residential care, we ensure that there is consistency in terms of what the facility operator is allowed to charge. That consistency must be communicated to the patient and their family, and if there is a difficulty in managing that cost, they can apply to the health authority for a waiver which will be granted. We will not leave any vulnerable seniors in residential care having to pay for a fee they cannot afford.