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NEWS NATIONAL

Health system no better, poll finds

Mon, September 17, 2007

Despite jacked-up health spending, voters aren't impressed with the results.

By JAMES WALLACE, SUN MEDIA



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In the eyes of Ontarians, the province's health-care system hasn't improved under the Liberals, despite a 30 per cent spending hike, an SES Research/Sun Media poll suggests.



Since 2003, when Dalton McGuinty's Liberals came to power, annual spending on health care has been jacked up to \$49 billion.

The SES Research/Sun Media poll found 69 per cent of respondents believe the health-care system is the same or worse than it was in 2003.

The poll found 51 per cent, one in two voters, believe little has changed within the health-care system over that time, 18 per cent think services are worse, 24 per cent believe the system has improved and seven per cent are unsure.

"When you look at the trade-off between those who think things have improved to those who think that it's worsened, it's not

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really a big improvement," said Nik Nanos, president of SES Research.

"Considering the amount of extra cash that's been plowed into Ontario's health-care system, I think for average Ontarians they're more likely to feel things have stayed the same."

Dalton McGuinty promised to make health care a priority during the last election and to deal with problems ranging from overcrowded and understaffed hospitals to wait lists for medical procedures and clogged emergency rooms.

Health spending has risen 30 per cent to more than \$49 billion since 2003, but that hasn't translated into perceived results or political credit for the Liberal government.

"What this research suggests is that even if the Liberals go around and trumpet all the extra money they've put into the health-care system, there's a sizable portion of Ontarians who don't believe it's made a real difference," Nanos said.

On the other hand, about one in four younger voters, who are the least likely to use the health-care system, believe things have improved.

"Demographically, probably the biggest gain for the Liberals on this particular front is among younger voters, those under 29 years of age," Nanos said.

Voters aged from 30 to 59 were the most likely to believe the province's health system is the same or has become worse.

Meanwhile, 34 per cent of Ontarians who are 60 years and older -- and most likely to use health-care services -- believe the province's health-care system has improved.

"That actually might be the best indicator of what's actually happening because they're users of the health-care system," Nanos said.

But with such a large block of voters incredulous that health investments are paying dividends, convincing voters that public money will be well spent over the next four years may be a challenge for all three parties.

In this campaign, McGuinty has promised to boost the health budget by \$8.7 billion over the next four years.

He wants to reduce the number of Ontarians without family doctors by 500,000, hire 9,000 nurses, reduce wait times and improve emergency room service.



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Conservative Leader John Tory has pledged \$8.5 billion. His plan includes eliminating the \$2.5-billion Liberal health-care premium, spending \$540 million on new electronic health records to cut prescription errors and modernize medical record-keeping, and spending \$400 million to recruit doctors and nurses.

NDP Leader Howard Hampton hasn't detailed his health platform or its cost but has promised to phase out the health-care tax and give low- and middle-income families a \$450 tax rebate.

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