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NEWS

by AMY STEELE

Headline

The Alberta chapter of the Consumers' Association of Canada recently conducted an investigation into long-term care insurance and concluded that it wasn't a good option for Albertans concerned they might eventually end up in a nursing home.

However, it looks like the provincial government is planning to encourage Albertans to buy long-term care insurance. Last week, the province released a new Health Policy Framework that outlines its controversial health care reform proposals. The plan has 10 policy directions, including "creating longer-term sustainability and flexible funding options." Under that category, the Alberta Health and Wellness website states that the government is looking at ways to pay for continuing care.

"It may mean Albertans can buy insurance for things like taking care of loved ones in long-term care," the website states. "Not only will purchasing insurance give Albertans more options to plan for the future, it will make the system more affordable in the long term."

Wendy Armstrong, a researcher at the Alberta chapter of the Consumers' Association of Canada (CAC), says long-term care insurance has actually been around in the province since the early 1990s, but her organization doesn't recommend that Albertans buy it.

"Based on our investigation, long-term care insurance does not live up to its promises or provide good value for money. Policies are a minefield of misleading claims, fine print exclusions, escalating premiums with few useable benefits and no real security," writes Armstrong in a recent CAC newsletter. "Most policies do not cover the most important expenses that eat away at quality of life and quality of care. Policies that would cover such expenses are far beyond the reach of most families."

Armstrong says one major problem with long-term care insurance is that some people won't be able to buy a policy because they're considered too high risk. Meanwhile, those who do buy a policy might discover the care they need isn't covered.

The provincial government is considering allowing Albertans to buy private insurance and to pay for hip, knee or cataract surgery in private clinics, which would enable them to avoid waiting lists in the public system.

Armstrong says people wanting to know what the "third way" will look like in the public health care system should "find out what's happened to long-term care."

Alberta's long-term care system includes conventional nursing homes for people who require high levels of care, but the province also has an expanding number of what are called assisted or supported living facilities, which are aimed at people who don't need as much care and want to live in a less institutionalized setting. Nursing homes have to meet certain care standards under the province's Nursing Homes Act, and residents pay an accommodation fee that is approved by the government, which includes all their medical care and supplies and. Supported or assisted living facilities are private and are not currently governed by any care standards, and residents have to pay an accommodation fee as well as pay for all their medical care and supplies. The government has promised to introduce new long-term care standards, which would apply to all facilities.

Armstrong says what's happening in Alberta is people with high care needs who would have ended up in nursing homes in the past can now end up in assisted living facilities, where they may face higher costs and receive less care, because nursing homes are full.

"What's happening is they're downloading all these costs to individual families," she says.

The government does offer subsidies for long-term care for low-income Albertans, but Armstrong says many families don't qualify for assistance because their income is deemed too high, and then they struggle to pay their bills. In some cases, this can lead to extreme situations - the spouse still living at home can end up destitute in order to pay for their loved one's long-term care expenses.

"Costs and burdens are so crippling for people that need any kind of high-needs residential care these days that lawyers and accountants are advising people to divorce and people are considering it and doing it," she says.

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