

## Candidates discuss pharmacare proposals at all-candidates meeting

**By Brock Weir**

Canada has built an international reputation on the strength of its public health care system, and the legacy of this system and a Federal election is often a chance for political parties to share their vision for the future of healthcare.

This election is no exception, with several parties offering new and renewed proposals for a national pharmacare system, a proposal which some parties agree will save Canadians money in the long run, with others agreeing it will put a strain on the system.

Candidates offered their visions for the Canadian healthcare system at last week's all-candidates debate hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce where they were asked if they supported universal pharmacare ? that is, a plan to help Canadians receive more affordable prescription medicine ? and, if so, how that would be paid for.

Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Liberal candidate Leah Taylor Roy kicked off the discussion with an unequivocal yes. While she said Canada is 'proud' of its healthcare system, to have a universal healthcare system without a national pharmacare plan 'just doesn't make sense.'

Addressing her answer to the business-owners in the room, Ms. Taylor Roy said, 'I am sure you very well understand the concept of return on investment; I think this is one of those programs where the return that we will get as a society, both in economic benefits as well as the overall wellbeing of the country, is very, very important. There should be no mother having to decide whether they can pay for their children's epi pens that they have to take to school or their children's backpack and shoes. Today, that's the kind of choice many families have to make and it is just not right.

'If you have a very good national healthcare system as we do, and you cannot afford to get medicines that are required, you end up going to the doctor more often, you end up going to the emergency room, and the long-term costs of doing that are far outweighed by the cost of the pharmacare system.'

But, she said, a re-elected Liberal government would not implement such a system immediately; rather it would be phased in over time, involving pharmacists and drug companies in the conversation 'to work to get our very high drug costs in Canada down and get a system in place to take care of all our people.'

Newmarket-Aurora Libertarian candidate Serge Korovitsyn offered an equally unequivocal answer ? in his case, a firm no, stating that people shouldn't have to pay if others get sick.

Yvonne Kelly, Newmarket-Aurora's NDP candidate, however, had a very different point of view, stating a New Democrat government would roll out a national pharmacare plan immediately, but with a phased-in approach as well.

?We would like to say that in contrast to the Liberals who have said a lot of the same things I am probably going to say, they have been looking at this for quite a long time, to their credit, but have not taken action on the pharmacare plan as yet,? she said. ?As the NDP's legacy is healthcare in Canada, we recognize that being a country that pays the third highest cost for drugs and pharmaceuticals in the world, we need to get this in order. We are the only country with the universal health care program without prescription drug coverage for people in need ? not because they're lazy, but because they actually need good health. A universal comprehensive national pharmacare plan has benefits for everyone, including small businesses and frontline health care providers.

?A pharmacare program is just one part of this plan but we also need a dental program. We need a program to address the opioid crisis we have in this country and we need to lower overall expenses. This is something business owners should understand. Purchasing power when we buy pharmacare in bulk, it will be significant savings that will help boost small business and economic growth.?

Taking an opposing viewpoint on this was Andrew McCaughtrie, Newmarket-Aurora candidate for the People's Party of Canada. His party, he says, believes in ?backing off the provinces? and letting them handle what is in their own jurisdiction. This, he argued, is the case with health care. His party's solution, he said, is the Federal Government giving the Provinces the funding for health care and then stepping back and letting them implement programs as they see fit ? including taking GST money directly to the provinces with ?no strings attached.?

While Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Conservative candidate Leona Alleslev said she agreed looking at a national pharmacare plan was a ?very important conversation that we need to have,? she asked, ?What problem exactly are we trying to solve with healthcare??

?98 per cent of Canadians already have, or are eligible for, private or public drug coverage. So, do we need a universal plan to replace to address not only the two per cent but replace the 98 per cent who already have it, at the cost of \$19 billion, which is the estimate from the Budget Office,? she said. ?The Liberals have been talking about this since 1994. Lots of people have been talking about it. Clearly it is cost prohibitive. What we are trying to solve and all agree on is that those people who need the coverage, who don't have the coverage, yes, it is our responsibility as a society to figure out how to do that. But we don't need to do it by taking on 100 per cent of the responsibility as a federal government.

?The Canada Health Act ensures that we have a minimum standard of health care for every Canadian citizen, regardless of where they live. It is the Federal Government's job to ensure we have the right standard and that we are ensuring that each province is delivering effectively on that standard. Those are the things that are not being done that we need to do. The Conservatives have promised we will increase transfers to provinces for both the social credit and the health transfer by three per cent. We are going to invest in the infrastructure that allows the health care system to be effective and proactive in MRI and CT scans for \$1.5 billion. There is no question that we don't want citizens to go without drug coverage, but we, the government, do not need to replace 100 per cent of that drug coverage to do it.?

Walter Bauer, Green Party candidate for Newmarket-Aurora, closed out the debate, stating the Green Party's platform is fully costed and offers free pharmacare.

?The problem we're trying to solve is all purchases and people should be able to understand this, bulk purchases of pharmaceuticals will save Canadians money in the long run,? he said. ?We're also going to provide dental care for low-income Canadians. Both of those will reduce the cost of benefits currently paid by businesses.?