

The Scar on My Brother's Arm



My brother has a wide scar from his wrist to his inner elbow. When he was five years old he put his arm through the window of our porch door, and as he pulled it out, the jagged broken glass cut a long gash in the white underside of his arm. My mother didn't take him to have it stitched together because we couldn't afford to pay the doctor. The scar is a reminder of the days before Medicare.

Perhaps the single most important event affecting the emotional life of my extended family was the death of my mother's mother in childbirth on a Saskatchewan farm in 1921. Lack of medical help left four children motherless that day. My mother was two years old at the time. Nine years later her father died of an illness that's easily treatable today.

Stories like this are told many times over by an older generation. I grew up on stories of children who died of pneumonia or whooping cough or tuberculosis before we had penicillin and other drugs. The shattering effects of death, accident and disease darken our lives through generations.

Medicare was born in Tommy Douglas's Saskatchewan in 1962. It wasn't an easy birth. Doctors throughout the province withdrew their services, protesting the requirement that they collect their fees only from the government. Nonetheless, Chief Justice Emmett Hall recommended the system for all of Canada, and the government of Lester Pearson passed the Medical Care Act in 1966. It

ensured that every resident of Canada would receive necessary hospital treatment and doctor's care, paid through general taxes or compulsory health insurance premiums.

It's easy to forget what pre-Medicare times were like. Those born after 1967 have never known a time without access to healthcare services. When I see the fashion-fixated out in the bitter winter cold without gloves or hats, I'm distressed by the cavalier attitude toward something as precious as health.

We live in a time of widespread prosperity. Many expect, and can afford, extraordinary health care, which is difficult to deliver in a public system—especially when that system has been undermined and underfunded. People grow dissatisfied. The extremely wealthy fly to the Mayo Clinic or to Scripps, and ask why we can't have private, for-profit options here in Canada.

The first for-profit hospital in Alberta got the government go-ahead in September. A weary or apathetic public didn't even protest this not-so-thin edge of the wedge.

Medicare is the pride of Canada and part of our national identity. Its principle of equal access for all is central to a culture of fairness and compassion. If we affirm the value and dignity of every human being, then a two-tier system with different standards of care for those who can pay and those who cannot, violates our sense of equity and social justice.

Are we going to let something as fine as Medicare slip away? Do we no longer notice the scar on our brother's arm?

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