

# HOW GOOD IS CANADIAN HEALTH CARE?

In celebration of the Fraser Institute's 35th anniversary, each issue of *Fraser Forum* in 2009 will look at a different milestone in the Institute's history. This feature looks at the history of two of the Institute's well-known health publications series, *Waiting Your Turn* and the hospital report cards.

**I**n 2008, thousands of Canadians found themselves on a waiting list for health care—750,794 Canadians, to be exact, according to an estimate by the Fraser Institute.

These Canadians waited, on average, 17.3 weeks for treatment from the time they obtained a general practitioner's referral to the time their treatment was provided by a specialist.

With so many Canadians waiting so long for medically necessary care, it should come as no surprise that wait lists are a hot topic in Canada today. But this wasn't always the case. Twenty years ago, before the first edition of the Institute's *Waiting Your Turn*—a study of hospital waiting lists in Canada—was published, there was anecdotal evidence but no real measurement of wait times for care.

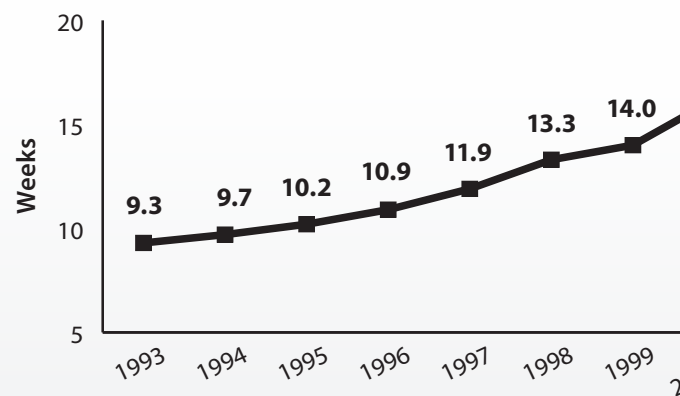
The idea to begin systematically measuring wait times in Canada came from Britain. While visiting England in the late 1980s, Michael Walker, founding Executive Director of the Fraser Institute, came across a guide to hospital waiting lists in London, a booklet published by the British government that showed which hospitals had the shortest (and longest) waits for surgery.

"I thought to myself, if it's happening in Britain and our health care system is patterned after the British system, then it's probably going to happen here," Walker says.

On his return, Walker contacted Steven Globerman, a professor at Simon Fraser University, to research waiting lists, with the help of Lorna Hoye, a researcher at the Institute. Based on this research, Globerman and Hoye developed a questionnaire for specialists that would ask about wait times for various surgical procedures. The Institute received assistance from the British Columbia Medical Association, which helped generate a mailing list and arranged for the pre-testing of questionnaires. This help, recalls Walker, was "crucial" to the success of the survey.

The first edition of *Waiting Your Turn*, published in 1990, covered wait times in BC. The second edition, published in 1992, tracked five provinces, and in 1993, *Waiting Your Turn* went na-

Median wait time in Canada from general practitioner's



tional. The survey has not changed much since the early 1990s, but in 2003, a psychiatric wait times survey was added.

"It was becoming more and more obvious that the deterioration in Canada's public health care program was not confined to just the physical specialties, and yet there was little measurement of the extent of deterioration in access to mental health services," says Nadeem Esmail, Director of Health System Performance Studies at the Institute and co-author of *Waiting Your Turn* since 2002.

When the first edition of *Waiting Your Turn* was released in 1990, reactions were varied. The general public, Walker notes, found the study "helpful, but also worrisome." The government's initial reaction was "quite negative," but since that time, the government has attempted to improve the situation by targeting specific wait times. Though these actions have not done much to reduce wait times overall, the acknowledgment that there is a problem with Canada's health care system is a welcome change.

"When we first started measuring wait times, the Canadian Hospital Association said that there was no such thing as waiting lists," recalls Walker. "In the last 20 years, people have come to realize that what we've been saying is in fact the case."

## WAITING YOUR TURN AND THE HOSPITAL REPORT CARDS:

### WAITING YOUR TURN

**18** editions published since 1990

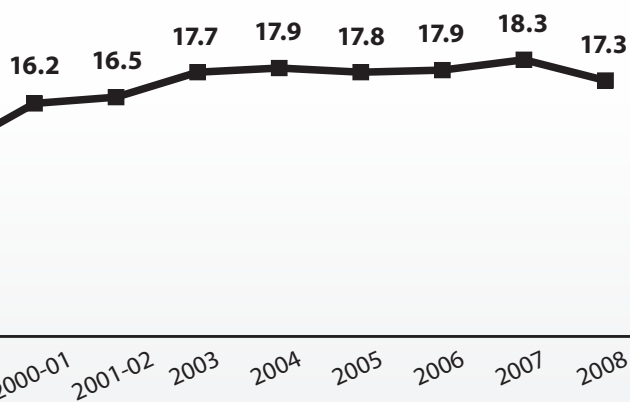
**2,570** Canadian specialists surveyed in 2008

**543** Canadian psychiatrists surveyed in 2008

**17.3 weeks** – total wait time between visiting a general practitioner and receiving treatment in 2008

**392** related media hits in 2008

referral to treatment by a specialist, 1993 to 2008



## Grading Canada's hospitals

By 2006, the Institute had published many more studies in health care policy, many of which are still updated each year. But at the time, it did not have a report that would help patients choose the best hospital for their inpatient care by providing them with information on the performance of their local hospitals.

Seeing this gap, Fraser Institute Executive Director Mark Mullins thought it would be “a natural extension of our work in health care” to produce a detailed assessment of hospitals in the form of a report card. With that idea in mind, he set out to find a suitable data source and a sound methodology. The data came from the Canadian Institute for Health Information's Discharge Abstract Database, which documents every overnight hospital stay in all Canadian provinces except Quebec. Looking at a number of hospital report cards from around the world, Mullins settled on a methodology developed by the US Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and researchers at Stanford University.

“The major advantage of this methodology is that it is fully transparent,” Mullins notes. “You can see exactly what you're getting and how it works.”

The first Ontario hospital report card was based on more than 8.5 million patient records, shown across 50 quality and safety indicators for 136 hospitals and 138 municipalities for the years 1997 to 2005. Hospitals were scored and ranked for each separate indicator and an overall mortality score based on the Institute's Hospital Mortality Index. This report was the first in Canada to provide patients with comparable, hospital-specific performance measurement, incomplete in just one respect: it could not name the majority of the hospitals it ranked.

“That's the twist in Canada,” explains Mullins. “You must ask for permission from each individual hospital, and if they don't grant it, you're not allowed to publish their name.”

In that first year, 43 hospitals agreed to allow the Institute to publish their name alongside their results, but that number has dropped since then. Only 17 hospitals agreed to be identified in the 2009 edition of the Ontario report card.

The Institute faced a similar situation when it published its first report card on British Columbia's hospitals in 2008: BC's regional health authorities refused to identify any of the province's 95 hospitals.

“When the government refused to release the names of the hospitals for last year's report card, the public was incensed,” recalls Nadeem Esmail, the Institute's Director of Health System Performance Studies and co-author of the hospital report card. The government was criticized heavily in the media and by other elected officials, including NDP health critic Adrian Dix.

Earlier this year, however, the BC government reversed course and announced that it would release enough information to the Institute so that the report card could identify every hospital in the province by name.

“With this change of policy, BC's government has taken a major step forward in terms of openness and public accountability,” Esmail says. “BC's health minister should be applauded for providing patients, taxpayers, and health care providers the opportunity to make more informed decisions about health care.”

The 2009 BC hospital report card—the first to identify all hospitals by name—was released last month. The release was aided significantly by the *Vancouver Sun*, which provided comprehensive coverage of the report card's findings over several days.

“Providing the public with accurate information on the performance of public institutions is the first step towards encouraging improvement,” says Esmail. “Both patients and care providers benefit from knowing where the standard of care might be improved and where examples of excellence can be found.”

The Institute plans to release its first report card on Alberta's hospitals later this year. As with the inaugural BC report, the Alberta government has not allowed any hospitals to be named. However, with the laudable BC example of openness and accountability next door, both Esmail and Mullins hope to see full identification of Alberta hospitals in future reports.

—Kristin Fryer

## BY THE NUMBERS

### HOSPITAL REPORT CARDS: BC AND ONTARIO

5 report cards published since 2006

231 hospitals scored and ranked in 2009

10.5 million Ontario patient records from 1997/98 to 2006/07

2.5 million BC patient records from 2001/02 to 2006/07

185 related media hits in 2008