

American health care problems coming to Canada?

By Lorene Oikawa

The images flicker across the television at the front of the conference room. The audience sits quietly, intently watching a scene with actress Laura Dern.

Dern portrays a doctor for an American for-profit health company and she has just denied a life-saving transplant operation. Her colleagues applaud her decision, congratulating her on saving the company half-a-million dollars for the reallocation of resources.

It's a familiar scenario across the U.S. and according to one doctor may soon be coming to Canada if the premier has his way.

Linda Peeno, the doctor who blew the whistle on the American HMOs (Health Maintenance Organizations) who deny benefits to thousands of patients, tells the crowd at the Sheraton Guildford on October 24 that she heard the premier's announcement of a P3 (public private partnership). Peeno was on a speaking tour co-sponsored by the BCGEU and the B.C. Nurses Union.

She disputes Campbell's claim that it will provide a return to investment, and won't cost Canadians anything.

Peeno says the opposite is true: "There will be a huge cost and an increase in harm to patients."

"Privatizing a little bit is like being a little bit pregnant," she said.

The focus of the "managed care" system is to minimize loss and maximize profits.

Peeno provided this same message to the Romanow Commission in May of this year.

She asks the audience to imagine a funnel with a large opening on top. She says this is the money that the company is collecting and the small opening at the bottom is what is spent on patient care.

And then the companies start adding filters to reduce what is

coming out. She explains that the filters are in the form of tightened criteria, i.e., reducing what will be covered. The company makes the decisions on what they consider is medically necessary.

Even non-profit HMOs are not immune. Peeno explains that when people start to adopt business terms (describing patients as consumers) our culture and value systems are changed. "Patients aren't people; we're all widgets."

During an emotionally charged question and answer period, members of the community including nurses and support workers shared their experiences and described the plight of many patients including seniors. One nurse was visibly distressed as she described "diversion." "I had to send someone 45 minutes away because the CEO says no overtime."

Peeno emphasizes the need to speak up. "We have to work at making stories heard and collected. Stories affect us on a gut level. That's what stories can do."

The scene with Laura Dern is a true story, based on Peeno's experiences. Peeno says at the end of that particular day she was leaving her office when she saw a modern-art sculpture being installed in the marble entrance of the building. A colleague comments that the new sculpture costs half-a-million dollars.

That moment, says Peeno, was her "first bolt of reality." She denied a heart transplant to save the company money only to find out that the company was spending just as much money on a sculpture for their opulent post-modern building.

Later, the doctor would find out that the sculpture actually cost \$3.8 million.

Peeno met with community members in Vancouver, Kelowna, Victoria, and Burnaby, before her final engagement in Surrey.

Lorene Oikawa is Second Vice-chair of Local 604.



BED CLOSURES have come to dominate health care issues in B.C. These "beds" were part of the demonstration in Penticton against the Liberals.