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## **Citizens' Role in Health Care Accountability: Canada Lags**

Ottawa – It is the quality, not the quantity, of citizen participation in decision-making that is the key to greater accountability and effectiveness in health care.

This is the thrust of the latest of CPRN's Health Care Accountability Papers.

*Hamstrung and Hogtied: Cascading Constraints on Citizen Governors in Medicare* is by Colleen Flood, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, Faculty of Law, and Department of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation at the University of Toronto, and Tom Archibald, Research Associate and S.J.D. Candidate, Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto.

The authors explore the role citizens can play in improving accountability at five different levels in the health care system: (1) federal and provincial governments and health ministries, (2) inter-provincial agencies and provincial quality councils, (3) regional health authorities, (4) hospital boards, and (5) self-regulating professional colleges and professional associations.

“Accountability is the Achille’s heel of public health care in Canada,” says Flood. “but we need to be very clear on what we expect it to achieve before we institutionalize it.”

Flood and Archibald see the role of citizen governors as two-fold:

- To provide a check on the political accommodations between governments and other interest groups, like doctors, and to better ensure the values, needs and interests of citizens are adequately reflected in decision-making, and
- To ensure that experiential knowledge from patients and local organizations is considered in decision-making.

“To achieve these goals demands careful institutional design to make sure the citizens’ role is not subject to ‘capture’ by providers, experts and government officials,” says Flood. “No rigorous thought has been given to this task in Canada to date.”

In fact, the authors find Canada’s failure to make rationing and resource allocation decisions more transparent and to include citizens in decision-making processes show it has much to learn from other countries they studied.

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They suggest, for example, that Canada might consider the Australian model of funding grassroots citizen and consumer groups through a central agency. The goal is to get citizens more involved with decision-making at all levels.

They warn, however, that citizen involvement is not a panacea. Including citizens in decision-making entities without the power to influence outcomes can breed cynicism and passivity. At times, accountability might be better achieved through improved reporting on performance. In still other situations, what may be required is a fair, accessible, hearing process to allow individuals to challenge Medicare decision-making.

“In the end,” says Flood, “the measure for evaluating citizen governance should be the extent to which it truly improves the level of accountability for, *and* the overall quality of, decision-making. Every participatory initiative should clearly meet that test.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

For more information contact:

Colleen Flood, • E-mail: [colleen.flood@utoronto.ca](mailto:colleen.flood@utoronto.ca) • Tel: (416) 964-8758

Peter Puxley, Director, Public Affairs • E-mail: [ppuxley@cprn.org](mailto:ppuxley@cprn.org) • Tel: (613) 567-7500 ext. 2019