

Premier touts Saskatchewan's 'lean' health-care gains

GLORIA GALLOWAY

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Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall will tell a conference of health experts in Montebello, Que., on Wednesday about the progress his province is making to reduce care costs while delivering better treatment to patients.

Mr. Wall was shot down by the federal government earlier this year after he proposed Ottawa create a fund to help provinces find innovative ways to improve care. But Saskatchewan is still taking steps to make its own system more efficient and Mr. Wall thinks other jurisdictions could learn from the experience.

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The event in Montebello is organized by the Canada Health Infoway. Among the 115 delegates expected to attend are senior government officials and health-care executives.

Saskatchewan was the first province in Canada to introduce the so-called "lean" system of health-care management which mimics approaches devised by the Japanese automotive industry to eliminate waste and ensure that all work serves the customer – in this case the patient. It requires the identification of both the worthwhile and the useless steps in every process and all staff are involved in improving workflow and reducing waste.

Mr. Wall told reporters at the Saskatchewan Legislature on Tuesday that he will talk about "the fact that we've save \$10-million as a province just in terms of better management of blood." Blood has a shelf life and too much was being thrown away because it had passed its due date.

In addition, "we have taken a fairly targeted approach to reducing the surgical wait times in the province," Mr. Wall said. "We brought to bear innovation to do it. Some disagreed with the innovation because it involved a private component within the public system – no queue jumping, no use of credit cards. But we have seen a dramatic reduction in wait times."

The wait times for CAT scans at the province's cancer agency, for example, have been cut by 90 per cent, the Premier said.

All provinces must find ways to provide health care more efficiently after Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced that the annual 6-per-cent increases in transfers from Ottawa that have been in effect since 2004 will end in 2016-17 and be replaced by increases tied instead to economic growth.

Ontario and Quebec have accused the federal Conservatives of trying to eliminate a multi-billion-dollar deficit on the backs of the provinces. And the federal New Democrats have characterized the changes to the funding formula as a \$31-billion cut.

But Mr. Wall told reporters there is no question that provinces have to find ways to rein in rising health-care costs because annual hikes in the order of 8 per cent are not sustainable.

He said he will tell the Montebello conference about progress he and PEI Premier Robert Ghiz have made in drafting standards to ensure innovations are shared between the country's 13 separate health-care systems. That effort will focus heavily on reducing labour costs.

But he will also talk about small innovations that have reduced inefficiencies. For instance, staff in one hospital complained that they had to walk a long way to get warming blankets for chemo patients.

“Sometimes lean isn’t just about saving money, sometimes it’s about better patient care and sometimes it’s about morale of our staff,” he said. “We are making progress. It’s slow and it’s an imperfect process that we’re in. But it’s one that’s bearing results and we’re going to talk about it in Montebello.”