

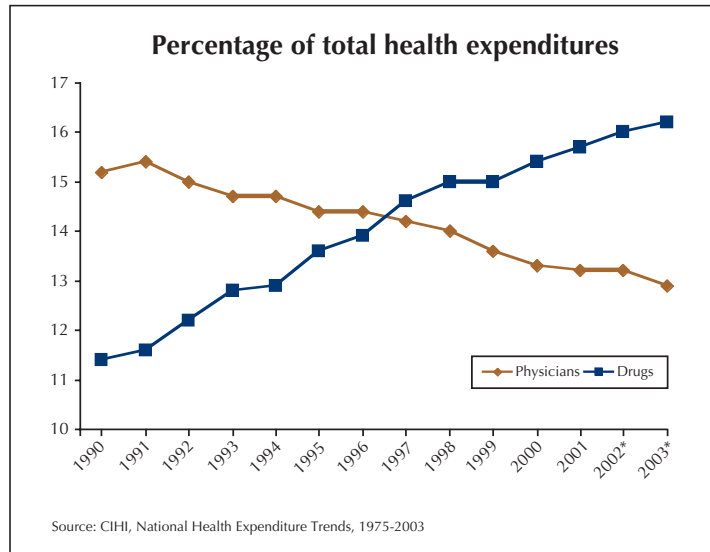
Health care spending rises 4.6% in 2003

Total health care spending in Canada in 2003 is estimated to have reached \$121.4 billion, according to a Canadian Institute for Health Information report. This increase of 4.6% (after inflation) over 2002, continues an upward spiral that began in 1996, following 5 years with annual increases of only 0.8%, according to *National Health Expenditure Trends in Canada 1975–2003*.

Health care expenditures in 2003 are expected to represent 10% of the gross domestic product, which returns Canada to the peak level reached in 1992.

Per capita spending is projected to reach \$3839, \$200 more than 2002. Among the provinces, Manitoba is expected to spend the most per capita in 2003 at \$4220 followed by Alberta (\$4010) and Ontario (\$3945).

Two of the big-ticket increases are for capital projects (up 65% in the last 5 years) and drug spending (up 45%). Spending on physician services has increased 28% over the same period and now represents less than 13% of total health expenditures. Hospitals rank first at



30% followed by drugs at 16%.

The percentage of private spending has increased only slightly in the last decade from 28% to 30.1%, but is at an all-time high. The largest proportion of private spending (36%) goes to other professionals such as dentists (23%). A close second is spending on drugs (33%), with prescription drugs absorbing 23% and non-prescription drugs the remaining 10%.

Have your say: All Canadian physicians will soon receive the National Physician Survey from CMA, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. The census gathers information on everything from practice setting to future plans. Physicians may also complete it online (www.cma.ca). — *Lynda Buske*, Associate Director of Research, CMA

INFLUENZA

Fujian flu more severe, but not unusual

It arrived sooner and hit harder, but this year's strain of influenza isn't anything out of the ordinary, experts say.

A/Fujian influenza, a mutation of last year's Panama strain, is regarded as more virulent and accounted for more than 90% of reported flu cases in December, states Health Canada.

This is the most severe flu season in 4 years, acknowledges Dr. Theresa Tam, chief of respiratory disease at the Centre for Infectious Disease Control and Prevention. A new flu strain typically affects younger and older people, she adds.

At the end of 2003, Health Canada had confirmed 2 deaths in

children with confirmed influenza A infection, and 2 other suspected deaths. Typically, up to 4 Canadian children die of influenza-related illness annually. On average, 500–1500 deaths per year are reported in Canada due to influenza or influenza-related pneumonia.

Given reports of fatalities among children in British Columbia and the vulnerability of the pediatric population to the new flu strain, Tam recommends that Canada follow the US lead in advocating routine immunization of children.

At present, about 30%–40% of parents get their children immunized, says Dr. Danuta Skowronski, an epidemiologist with the BC

Centre for Disease Control. "It's particularly important that they are vaccinated against influenza if they suffer from heart or lung disease, cancer, or have some type of immune-compromising disorder."

Although the current vaccine is not designed to prevent infection with A/Fujian, it will give partial protection, adds Dr. Raymond Tellier, a microbiologist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Tellier reports seeing "many more sick children" than usual, as do some adult hospitals. The Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax reports a spike in cases among the elderly. — *Louise Gagnon*, Ottawa

For the latest information see: Health Alerts, Influenza at www.cmaj.ca