

Pulse

Canada among leaders in OECD health results

The latest data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicate that Canada compares favourably with other highly

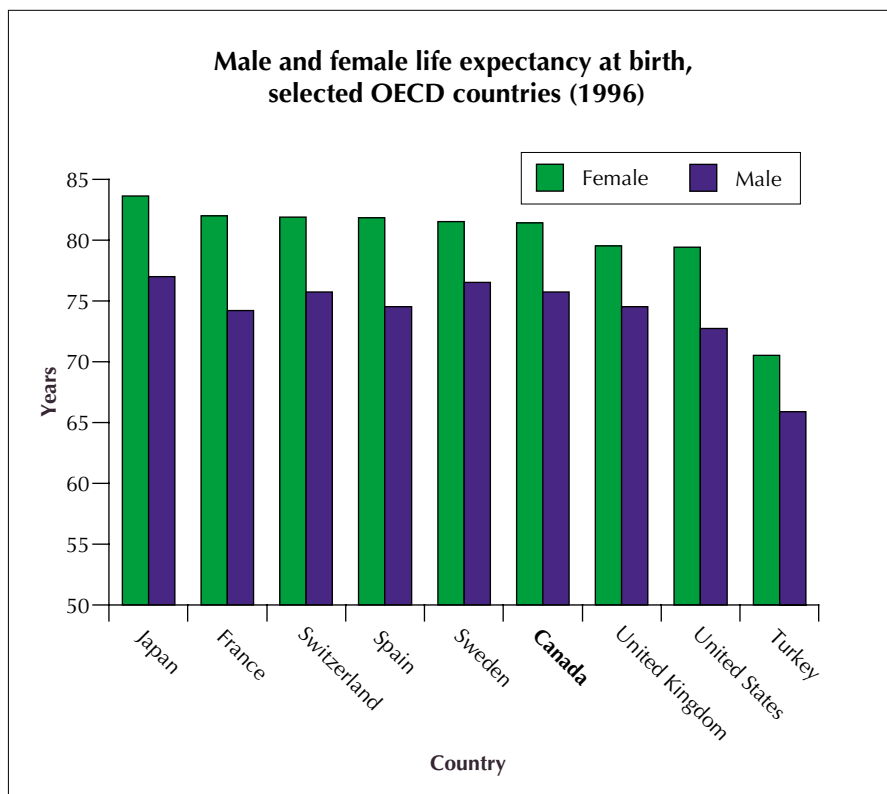
industrialized countries when it comes to life expectancy but is in the middle of the pack in terms of infant mortality.

In 1996, the life expectancy at birth

for a Canadian woman was 81.4 years, which ranked Canada sixth among the 28 countries for which data were available. Only Japan (83.6 years), France (82.0), Switzerland (81.9), Spain (81.8) and Sweden (81.5) have higher life expectancy rates for females. The US, at 79.4 years, ranked 17th, while Turkey had the lowest life expectancy rate for women, 70.5 years.

Canada ranked fourth in life expectancy at birth for men, at 75.7 years. Only Japan (77.0 years), Sweden (76.5), and Iceland (76.2) had superior rates. The US ranked 19th at 72.7 years, while Turkey again had the worst rate, 65.9 years.

In terms of infant mortality, Canada is tied with Belgium and the Czech Republic for 14th place among the 28 countries, with a rate of 6.0 deaths/1000 live births. The United States mirrors Canada, with an infant mortality rate of 6.1/1000. Iceland has the best rate, 3.7/1000 live births, followed closely by Japan (3.8), Finland (3.9) and Norway (4.0). Turkey, at 42.2/1000, had the highest infant mortality rate, with Mexico a distant second at 17/1000. — *Shelley Martin, CMA, martis@cma.ca*



Health promises scarce among US presidential candidates

Unlike 1992, when Bill Clinton rode the promise of universal health care right into the White House, this year's American presidential candidates are much more circumspect about using health care reform as a campaign issue. None is advocating any grand design to throw a safety net over the 44 million Americans who have no health insurance, but all are advocating incre-

mentalism. And none is even hinting at a single-payer national health service like Canada's — especially given the American media focus on ER shutdowns and growing waiting lists in Ontario, Quebec and most other provinces. Yes, these made headlines south of the border this winter.

In their run-up to the primaries, Democratic contenders Al Gore and

Bill Bradley put forward proposals to expand health insurance to children through the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), provide tax breaks to small businesses to offer health insurance, add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare (the program that covers the nation's elderly

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On the Net

Litigation online

If Canadians are lucky, they will never walk as far down the litigation trail as their American neighbours. However, the Internet is helping to spread the American gospel of victimization, and numerous sites are now available that publicize lawyers who specialize in targeting physicians.

Many American lawyers now have cyber practices and some certainly catch visitors' attention. The Shapiro and Shapiro site — www.shapiroshapiro.com — is home to Jim "The Hammer" Shapiro. This firm actively seeks medical malpractice cases with slogans such as "Sue the Bastards" and "I may be an S.O.B., but I am your S.O.B."

These days, however, not just fist-waving lawyers specialize in malpractice cases. Other sites, while presenting a friendlier face, still help build cases against doctors. For example, Med-Tort (www.medtort.com) claims to be the first completely online consultation service for attorneys and patients needing expert medical opinions.



The site was launched by a group of attorneys and physicians "in order to provide an efficient and economical means of identifying viable medical malpractice claims." Clients fill out online questionnaires, and within 7 days receive an emailed report stating whether or not they have a malpractice case. This service is currently restricted to the US, but can Canada be far behind?

Already there are signs of things to come. Medical and Surgical Litigation Consultants (www.medlit.com) is based

in Victoria and Toronto and offers a similar service to patients and lawyers. The 2 physicians involved, retired ob/gyn John Limbert and retired orthopedic surgeon Allan Gold, analyse and advise people on their rights regarding medical malpractice. They charge an average fee of \$200 to \$225 per hour; verbal reports cost \$600 to \$900, while written reports cost \$750 to \$1800.

A Calgary-based firm, Economica Ltd. (www.economica.ca), goes a step further with its electronic mailing lists. Here lawyers can discuss Canadian medical malpractice cases over the Internet or read a newsletter, *The Expert Witness*.

With all of these sites available, it is comforting that a new site called Doctors First (www.doctorsfirst.com) has been launched. In the interest of putting the interests of doctors first, it advises: "Don't remain unarmed in our battle against frivolous suits. Reduce the risk of ending up on the wrong side of 'v.'" — Michael O'Reilly, mike@oreilly.net

Election issues in US

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and some disabled patients) and provide scaled subsidies to families with limited incomes so that they might buy into the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. That giant program, which is available to federal employees, pools hundreds of private plans to get members better rates and more options. Bradley, who lost the race to Gore, also would have required parents to buy insurance for their kids. On the Republican side, Texas Governor George Bush and Arizona Senator John McCain would

also make CHIP money more readily available and would expand the range of Medicare and Medicaid. Bush, who appeared certain to win the race, would push a national program to allow individuals to sue their HMOs for shoddy care or denial of coverage; this is already law in Texas. McCain had advocated a law to empower people to insist that insurers and HMOs conform to certain service levels.

Clinton too has waded into the campaign, pushing a \$110-billion package of health insurance initiatives including expansion of CHIP and Medicare and Medicaid, offering tax credits for small businesses that provide workers with insurance and al-

lowing workers as young as 55 to buy into Medicare; it is now available only to those 65 or older. He hopes Congress will act on his bill before he leaves next January, but there is little chance of that happening.

Even the insurance industry has come on board with a renewal of its famous Harry and Louise campaign, which in the early 1990s lampooned the Clinton attempts to impose a federal bureaucracy over the nation's health care. It has now modified its message to advocate making it easier for people to buy private insurance, government subsidies for low-income workers and tax credits for small employers. — Milan Korcok, Florida