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The doctor who was forced to opt out

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Surgeon just fed up with medicare This is the story of a doctor who believed, and who still believes, in a health-care system that is public, free and universal - but who decided to opt out. Not for the money. Simply in order to do what he spent 12 years learning repairing shoulders, elbows and hands.

His name is Marc Beauchamp, he's 41 years old, he's the father of five children with a sixth on its way. He's an orthopedic surgeon, with a further specialty in upper-limb surgery.

What set him on the pathway to medicine occurred one day when he was 15 He had accidentally cut through two of his fingers. They were hanging by the skin when he got to the hospital in Granby, a small town an hour southeast of Montreal.

"We have to amputate," said the doctor there. "No way!" answered Beauchamp's father, and took off for Montreal with his son. There, they found a doctor who repaired the fingers so well that today they belong to one of the finest orthopedic surgeons in Montreal.

"When I saw what that doctor did, I thought, here's a pretty cool way to earn a living. So, I went into medicine," Beauchamp says. As chance would have it, he interned with the surgeon who'd sewed his fingers back on 10 years earlier.

Beauchamp sees the problems in our health-care system better than you or I. But he thought these could be fixed with "money from Ottawa" or through reforms.

He doesn't think so anymore.

"After my fellowship in Toronto, in 1996, I settled in Montreal and I was told I could only operate one day a week. My colleagues elsewhere in North America operate two or three days a week. Twice I've changed hospitals in order to have more operating time. I squabbled with management. Nothing doing. Last year I had the 'right' to operate for 44 days."

The thing is, Beauchamp does what's called "elective" surgery, operations that aren't absolutely vital and urgent, the surgery that gets limited so budgets can be controlled. It takes 10 months to get a first appointment with an orthopedist. And then 18 months for the operation.

"During all that time, some patients have to stop working. Others can't sleep, they hurt so much. Their doctors prescribe morphine. Some of them get hooked. Others become alcoholics. I'm not talking about exceptional cases. This happens constantly.

"And then, after all that time, what was once a simple tear is now inoperable. A slight injury turns into a permanent disability.

"And at the end of all these years of practise, not only do you have less experience to show for it, but you realize that the medicine you're forced to do is crap. And for that I spent 12 years studying? No!

"In Ottawa and Quebec City, we have two governments that were elected with health care as an absolute priority; in Quebec City we have the best health minister in history (Dr. Philippe Couillard, surgeon and possible successor to Liberal Premier Jean Charest); in my last year in the system, I had the best hospital bosses you could hope for. But every year was worse than the one before. So, I left."

That's right This physician who's involved in development projects in Brazil, this man with an acute social conscience, took himself off to a private clinic. He dropped out of health insurance, since it's forbidden to practise both publicly and privately.

Arthroscopy on the shoulder costs between \$4,000 and \$6,000. Waiting list? One week. Clients? A few of them are well off, of course, but they're mostly middle-class folk, factory workers - "ordinary" people, as NDP Leader Jack Layton would say.

Throughout the election campaign, the four principal political leaders will be repeating that they're against a "two-tier" health-care system and they'll pretend that all the waiting-list problems can be resolved by injecting more billions of dollars.

But those two-tier systems already exist. And with the Supreme Court of Canada handing down its decision in June in the Chaoulli case, the last barrier will soon be lifted the right to purchase insurance for private services. Quebec must unveil its plan to "respond" to the judgment this winter. The rest of Canada will soon have to do likewise.

Marc Beauchamp, meanwhile, stays far away from the ideologues. He doesn't claim to operate "the invisible hand of the market." Only with his own hands.

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Views From Quebec

[Illustration]

serge chapleau la presse

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