

HEALTH: SECOND OPINION: ONLINE RESOURCE: **CANADIAN HEALTH NETWORK**

Ottawa, don't pull the plug on superb website

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As health-care costs creep steadily upward, one of the favourite mantras of politicians and public-health officials is that individuals need to take greater responsibility for their health.

The public - and baby boomers in particular because they are the elephant in the health-care spending python - needs to get educated, to learn how to avoid unnecessary visits to the emergency room and stave off costly chronic diseases.

It's a laudable philosophy.

But, practically speaking, where do you go for the latest health information?

The Web is a great tool, at least in theory, but it's hard to sort the shamelessly promotional and the scientifically dubious from the legitimate. Not to mention that, given the preponderance of U.S. sites, it is a chore to find information relevant to Canadians, and available in both official languages.

That's why the **Canadian Health Network** (canadian-health-network.ca) is such a gem.

The website is user-friendly. The information is reliable, unbiased and timely, with a clear emphasis on practical information for staying healthy.

If you log on today, you'll find features on how to manage holiday stress and tips for keeping New Year's resolutions on healthy eating and weight loss, along with all the regular categories, ranging from active living to workplace health.

It's like having the Canadian library of health at your fingertips, just a mouse-click away.

It's telling that about 40 per cent of the website's five million hits a year come from health-care professionals. They, as much as anyone, know that credible, comprehensible healthy information is often lacking in cyberspace.

So why, oh why, is the **Canadian Health Network** shutting down? Why is the federal government cutting its funding effective March 31, 2008?

The Public Health Agency of Canada has been ordered to cut \$16.7-million from its grants to outside groups and, presumably, the quickest way to meet that target is to lop off the \$7-million going to the CHN.

In announcing the decision to the 26 affiliates who contribute to the site, the PHAC praised them as "visionaries in recognizing how the Internet could help people find credible information on diverse topics."

The affiliates don't need hollow praise, they need cold hard cash to keep the much-needed service up and running.

Can a government with an almost \$14-billion surplus so desperately need \$7-million that it has to silence one of the country's best sources of health information?

Or are there ulterior motives?

Cynics - and journalists top that list - have noted that, by some strange coincidence, about the time CHN funding was axed, Health Minister Tony Clement unveiled the new Healthy Canadians website (healthycanadians.gc.ca).

It looks surprisingly like a cheap knockoff of the CHN.

Governments reinventing the wheel is hardly a new phenomenon. Nor is the fact that they tend to deliver services less efficiently and effectively than non-profit organizations. (And you can bet your bottom dollar that Healthy Canadians will cost more than \$7-million a year to operate, making the savings argument moot.)

The real travesty is that Healthy Canadians is not an adequate substitute for the CHN. It is shamelessly promotional, has some troubling biases and is not user-friendly.

The welcoming page of Healthy Canadians includes - surprise, surprise - a picture of Mr. Clement, and prominently features news of the Children's Fitness Tax Credit, a government initiative aimed at attracting the votes of suburbanites, along with some useful information on the new food guide.

But what's worse is what's not available on the Healthy Canadians site. It doesn't cover half the topics you can find on CHN, nor half as well. There is little information on mental-health issues or abortion.

And let's compare the search engines. Enter the word "abortion" on the CHN search engine and you will get 16 references ranging from "what to expect if you decide to have an abortion" through to "abortion and breast cancer."

Enter the word "abortion" in the Healthy Canadians search engine and you get an unwieldy 1,637 hits, ranging from "shoot-tip abortion and pseudoterminal buds," a no-

doubt-riveting scientific paper from the Canadian Forest Service, to a link to the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Not exactly the timely, useful health information a Canadian needs.

It's the time for New Year's resolutions.

Here's one for the Health Minister: Restore the funding to the **Canadian Health Network**. Better still, boost the budget and promote the site aggressively.

As for the Healthy Canadians website: Keep it, but be clear about its mission - to promote government initiatives. That is legitimate, but it is not a substitute for good health information.

And that, more than anything else, is what we need to create a country of Healthy Canadians.

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