



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Health care tops Santa wish list

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News December 19, 2011

WHEN I was a kid I used to start my Christmas wish list in July.

By the time December rolled around I would have 100 or so items on my list. Every year I would address my letter to, «Santa's Workshop - North Pole,» pop it in the mail and wait for a reply.

One year, Mrs. Claus wrote back suggesting that in the spirit of the season I might want to consider paring down my list to four or five items.

Still suitably chastised, my Christmas wish list today will be for seniors, not me, and I'll limit that list to just three wishes.

There are enough reports and commissions on health care reform in Canada to fill Santa's sled. Very few of those reports have, in my opinion, recognized the challenges posed to our health care system by an aging population. My wish is that health care reform should first and foremost be capable of meeting the needs of Canada's seniors.

The rate of poverty in Metro Vancouver amongst those 65 and over is still the second highest of all metropolitan areas in Canada, at 18 per cent. My wish is that we do a better job on the seniors poverty file in the future than we have in the past.

My wish for housing is two-fold: first, that we get the federal government involved in housing matters; and second, that we make affordable housing a priority.

Canada's health care system primarily focuses on cure and treatment, but with Canada's 65+ population about to double in the next two decades my wish is for a new model of health care that allows for a larger role in health promotion and disease prevention, not just for seniors but for the whole population.

Not surprisingly, seniors take more prescription drugs than any other age demographic and while many seniors are covered by some type of prescription drug coverage my wish is for a national, comprehensive drug plan in this country.

Mental health is another increasingly urgent area for action, especially as it concerns Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. My wish is that we spend more of our health care dollars on the mental well being and the prevention of mental illness in seniors.

Now I anticipate that some of my readers will argue that we don't have enough money to fund such a fanciful list. I think those readers miss the point. We pay and we pay dearly for what we don't fund. Take for example the case of home care and non-medical home supports. We know that most seniors want to age in place in their

homes and communities for as long as possible. We also know that home care can prevent or delay institutionalization. And yet, we spend only 3.3 per cent of our total health care dollars on home care in Canada.

Home care is considered an essential pillar of the Canadian health care system but it is not part of the Canada Health Act. With very few standards and regulations, where one lives in Canada rather than what one needs determines the service received. That's not good enough and it really has to change.

I have exceeded my limit of three wishes in this column. I don't think Santa will mind. After all, both he and Mrs. Claus have seen a much longer wish list from me.

This is my final column for 2011. Let me close by wishing all of my readers a very Merry Christmas and a happy, safe and prosperous New Year.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.