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Physicians protest cuts to refugee health care on National Day of Action

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St. John's, NL – Today, physicians in St. John's joined their colleagues in 18 cities across Canada as part of the Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care (CDRC) National Day of Action to protest federal cuts to refugee health care.

Family physicians Dr. Pauline Duke and Dr. Norah Duggan said the nation-wide protests are a response to reckless cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) that have resulted in refugees being denied access to basic medical care, including care for life threatening conditions.

“Changes to the IFHP have resulted in important health services for refugee claimants being eliminated or very restricted across the country,” said Dr. Pauline Duke who is also a member of the CDRC’s national steering committee. “Denying basic and medically necessary care for those who have been forced to leave their home countries to escape war, violence, torture and persecution is inhumane.”

Cuts to the IFHP came into effect on June 30, 2012. In response to mounting pressure from health professionals and the public, the federal government made partial revisions to its planned cuts. The revisions maintained services for some refugees but not others. Changes to the way refugees are classified, dictates the type and level of care they are permitted to receive, which has created much confusion within the health system.

Some classes of refugees will only receive care if they are judged to have a disease that is dangerous to the public. This means many refugees will not receive care for emergencies, heart attacks, diabetes, cancer and mental health, as well as prenatal and child care. Many refugees living in Canada are also unable to obtain coverage of necessary medications, such as insulin or chemotherapy.

Dr. Norah Duggan is Past President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Chapter of the College of Family Physicians of Canada. She explained that cuts to preventive and primary health care is poor health policy that may actually result in increased costs to the health care system.

The CDRC has now joined with the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers to launch a constitutional court challenge on the grounds that the cuts are a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It has also submitted a proposal asking the federal government to restore health care coverage for refugees. To date, this proposal has been ignored.

“Denying basic medical care to vulnerable people in need is unethical, results in more costs for taxpayers and is contrary to what it means to be Canadian,” said Dr. Pauline Duke. “Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care and health professionals across the country will continue to fight for refugee health care services until the changes to the IFHP are reversed.”

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