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# NEWS

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## Injured pro players take a hit from Liberal's health bill

By [CHRISTINA BLIZZARD](#) -- Queen's Park Bureau



Health Minister George Smitherman was talking national values last week. You know, the two things Canadians hold dearest to their hearts: health care and hockey.

And right now the two are on a collision course with the Liberal government's introduction of a bill that's supposed to end so-called "two-tier" health care.

First, of course, there is no two-tier system to speak of in this province. Even the new private MRI and CAT scan clinics the previous Tory government allowed to go forward were instituted under strict regulations that would not permit patients to buy their way to the front of the line with a credit card instead of a health card.

One nagging problem has always been the issue of professional athletes. If Mats Sundin gets whacked in a hockey game on Saturday night, can he get an MRI or a CAT scan the next day? Should he be allowed to jump the queue?

It's complex, because professional athletes were excluded from coverage when David Peterson's Liberal government switched the way we pay for health care from OHIP premiums to an employer health tax. That's why the Tories brokered that controversial \$10-million "tax break" for sports teams last year. The government takes 2% of all those multi-million-dollar contracts for players like Sundin or the Raptors' Vince Carter for health care, and it doesn't give them a nickel's worth of treatment in return.

Most pro sports teams have private insurance and their own doctors. And if a player needs an MRI, he usually gets it off-hours. This could change, according to Smitherman. After all, if you and I can't pay to get an MRI off-hours without waiting, why



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should anyone else?

"The depth of your pocketbook isn't the measurement of how you qualify," Smitherman said. "Medical need as a guiding principle needs to be the one that is restored," he said.

That may sound warm and fuzzy, but if you start splitting hairs and making professional athletes wait for diagnostic tests out of some Karl Marx-style search for "equality," you're going to end up with a city where no one wants to play pro sports. Frankly, all the guys in my household would gladly give up their place in an MRI queue to any player who would guarantee them a Stanley Cup.

So before we all go too far down this road to "equality," let us all keep in mind one thing: hockey is as much a family value in this province as health care. If you're going to ask young men to have their bodies slammed into the boards for your entertainment, you must also allow them access to timely treatment. Especially when the teams are willing, and able, to pay for it.

Here endeth the first lesson.

Ontario's human rights commissioner says the province may be in contravention of the Ontario Human Rights Code now that it has repealed the Education Tax Credit.

"Technically, certainly they are not," Keith Norton said when I asked if the province is in compliance with the Code now that only Catholic schools get public funding.

"Nor were they previously," he added.

"The previous government wasn't (in compliance) with the tax credit, because they weren't offering equal opportunities to all of the various faith groups. They were probably in compliance with the Constitution, but there are principles enshrined in the Human Rights Code that go beyond that," he said.

Before the Tories extended a tax credit to other religious schools, a UN human rights committee said the province's system of funding only Catholic schools was discriminatory.

"I think it's clear that the Roman Catholic system has a special status under our Constitution, but that doesn't resolve the concerns of the others," Norton said.

He believes now is a good time for the province to overhaul the way religious schools are funded and suggests a system whereby such schools that want public money could all be supervised by an umbrella board.

"I think it's important that the academic side of the education be subjected to the same standards as other public education

programs," Norton said. "There may be some who will choose not to move under that umbrella. That should be their right and they would remain private schools.

"But it seems to me that kind of approach might well meet some of the concerns expressed by the UN, because if some structure like that could be in place, then no one could legitimately complain they were being denied funding, because they would have that opportunity."



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