

Cutting premiums a mistake — Mar

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Progressive Conservative leadership candidate Gary Mar unveiled his proposed cure for the province's ailing healthcare system last week.

Mar unveiled the policy last week and then conducted a telephone town hall on the initiative that drew 5,900 of his potential supporters to the telephone conference.

Mar is promising to expand primary care networks and streamline waiting lists for specialist referrals, as well as explore using public private partnerships (P3s) to build more long-term care spaces.

During the telephone town hall, Mar also said the government made a mistake phasing out healthcare premiums. In an interview afterwards, he said the phase-out did not seem to be part of a broader plan.

"It was roughly \$1 billion in revenue that the province gave up, where it didn't make any changes to the system," he said.

He emphasized as premier he would not be interested in bringing them back, but felt the government's move was not part of a broader plan.

"To my mind if you are changing

the revenue stream you also have to change how the system works, I didn't see any change in how the system worked."

He said the premiums also emphasized the cost of the system to Albertans.

"The fact that people understood that healthcare premiums were going into improving the healthcare system was important to many Albertans."

Primary care

Mar said he views primary care networks, where doctors work alongside dietitians, physiotherapists, nurses and other health professionals, as an idea that has worked very well and it only make sense to expand them.

"I started them in 2003 when I was minister of health and today almost 80 per cent of doctors who are GPs in the province serve roughly 80 per cent of Albertans."

Mar said while healthcare costs have skyrocketed, primary care networks have remained steady, an even more important reason to expand their reach.

"While the per capita spending in healthcare has gone up dramatically in the last eight years, the per capita spending on primary care has not changed at all."

He said expanding P3s could involve the private sector or not-for-profit arrangements, but with a focus on standards that could expand the available space.

"Whatever P3s we strike in the future, we have to ensure they maintain standards for the care of our seniors."

Mar is also promising to get other government departments into the work of keeping Albertans healthy with a wellness fund that would allocate money to programs run by other government departments.

He said the system is overly focused on treating illness and doesn't do enough to keep people out of hospitals in the first place.

"Right now we have an illness treatment system; we don't really have a health system. The best way we can make our system sustainable in the long run is to make sure Albertans are healthier."

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