



President's message. Rural health strategy revisited: pitching in the Dragons' Den

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I am preparing for an appearance on the *Dragons' Den*. The SRPC has a rural health strategy for sale. Problem is, no one seems to want to buy it! This usually means that either the product is flawed, the demand has been overestimated or the wrong market is being targeted. How can I persuade them to invest?

Is the product flawed? The SRPC's rural health strategy was developed initially as a tool to present to the Romanow and Kirby commissions, and in this it was remarkably successful. Both those commissions borrowed heavily from it in their own reports, as did the report that was produced by the Ministerial Advisory Council on Rural Health. A billion and a half dollars was proposed as the amount needed to seriously address the issues. Politicians then and since have identified the SRPC as the legitimate source of expertise on the question. They have handled but they have not bought.

Is the demand overestimated? Ontario has had to restructure its rural incentive program to prioritize truly rural and truly remote communities, because the "underserved" virus has started to spread farther and farther south, into larger and larger communities. The competition between communities for medical human resources is fierce and expensive, and if anything the demand has grown rather than diminished.

Is the wrong market being targeted? In a recent *Maclean's* article Andrew Coyne, reporting on a strategy conference held by the Liberal Party of Canada, wrote the following:

Time and again, the conference heard of the need

for a "national strategy" to do X. Only, as often as not, X was in provincial jurisdiction: health care, education, housing and so on. Time was when Ottawa could worm its way into provincial jurisdictions via the federal spending power, but not only is there no money for this, but successive federal governments have promised not to do so without the provinces' approval.¹

Maybe he's right. Maybe all we can expect the federal government to do is to cherry pick the odd popular project to use as evidence of engagement, but to steer clear of anything that could annoy its provincial allies. Maybe they are right to do so.

My pitch to the Dragons must also persuade them that I have no competition in the field. No one else is clamouring to solve the rural health issues that plague rural Canada. The problems have been well defined (mostly by the SRPC):

- appropriate selection of rural students into medical school
- appropriate rural curriculum
- appropriate rural training sites
- appropriate incentives to rural practice
- appropriate support when in practice
- appropriate relief when it is time for a break

I suspect the Dragons will send us away to sharpen our pencils, that they will tell me that although the message is persuasive, we have not found the right place or way to shop it. What do you think? Come with me into the Dragons' Den and help me pitch!

REFERENCE

1. Coyne A. The end of the Liberal empire. *Maclean's* 2010 Apr. 7. Available: www2.macleans.ca/2010/04/07/the-end-of-the-liberal-empire/#more-119220 (accessed 2010 May 1).

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