

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

P-18

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

P-18

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

Committee business

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday 8 April 2024

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Travaux du comité

1^{re} session
43^e législature
Lundi 8 avril 2024

Chair: Tom Rakocevic
Clerk: Tanzima Khan

Président : Tom Rakocevic
Greffière : Tanzima Khan

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Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
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Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-4327

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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Monday 8 April 2024

Lundi 8 avril 2024

The committee met at 1231 in room 151.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Good afternoon, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair this afternoon, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Crawford.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I nominate Lorne Coe.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Does the member accept that nomination?

Mr. Lorne Coe: Put your seat belts on.

Laughter.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Are there any further nominations? There being none, Mr. Coe, you are duly elected Acting Chair today. Thank you.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Good afternoon, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. The first item on the agenda is a motion filed by MPP Gélinas. I'm opening the floor to MPP Gélinas to read a motion into the record. Please proceed when you're ready.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts request that the Auditor General conduct a special audit into fees being charged to patients accessing primary health care services in Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much. Any debate? When you're ready, please.

M^{me} France Gélinas: First of all, the motion is very narrow. It only focuses on primary care. It came about because patients have come forward.

This lady came forward to tell us that MDDirect, who are just up here at 2559 Yonge Street, charges \$3,695 if you're under 20 years old, \$4,995 if you're over 65. There's Felix Health; Prime Medical Centre; Cleveland Clinic; Executive Health; La Vie health, a French one; South Keys Health Center; Appletree; ReVive Health Solutions; Telus—anyway, a whole list of them where in order to gain access to OHIP-covered health care, primary care—we're only focusing on primary care—you need to pay those fees up front. The lowest we've had so far in the list I have given you is \$400; the highest we've had so far in the list I have given you is \$4,995. Those are yearly fees in order to continue to have access to your—they are all physicians who work in those clinics. There are things going on with health with the nurse practitioners, but the ones that I have

read into the record, they're all physicians who bill OHIP, who will give you primary care, but in order to gain access to that primary care you have to pay. As I said, the lowest is \$400 and the highest is \$4,995 that I found.

I wrote, with my colleague MPP Jessica Bell, to the Auditor General and said, "Would you consider doing a value-for-money audit on this situation?" She answered back, basically saying that she would be open to doing a value-for-money audit on that. The list of audits for this year have all been selected, but if the committee on public accounts was to pass a motion, she would add it to this year so that we don't have to wait until next year to get it done.

Last time I put a similar motion forward was for what was happening at Laurentian University. The motion was accepted by the committee on public accounts. That was three years ago, but it was the same situation. The Auditor General had already made the list of the audits she was going to do for that year, but because we passed the motion, she did the special audit for Laurentian University. We passed that motion in the end of April or May—do you remember, Tanzima? Anyway, we'll say in May, and in September she had an interim report and by November she had her final report.

So it works. It's not the first time that the committee for public accounts would ask the Auditor General to add an audit, and this one, as I say, is really focused on primary care, people having to pay to gain access to primary care. I've listed a few; unfortunately, there are new ones just about every week.

That's it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much.

Any further debate? Yes, MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I just wanted to say this is well within the scope of this committee. We asked a question this morning. I heard the government say there's a federal loophole. Having the data and the analysis as to how much this is costing Ontarians is actually good information for us to have to close those loopholes and to determine policy. Right now we have policy by default in some respects, because what's happening right now in Ontario with regard to these fees is very permissive and there's no real resistance to the fee structure. So this would be good information for all members of the Legislature to have, and I think it will help us as lawmakers to address the loopholes, but also to be more proactive in protecting Ontarians.

This is ultimately, for some very vulnerable Ontarians, a consumer protection issue where you have people who feel like they have no choice but to pay these fees. I'm sure all of us agree that if you're a senior looking for a doctor, you shouldn't have to use your credit card, so this is a really good way for us to hold the system as a whole to account and really shine a light on these fees that are being served up.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Further debate? Madame Collard, s'il vous plaît. Merci.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci, monsieur le Président du comité.

While I agree with the intent of the motion, I'm actually just questioning—maybe we need clarity as to whether this is actually in the purview of the Auditor General, who is normally charged with studying how public funds are being spent. We're not talking about public funds here, so maybe we need clarity to make sure that it falls within the scope.

And then I will say that I support the idea, for sure. Having data to try to understand how far we've gone into privatizing our health care system—have we gone too far? How many people are affected? This is all very important data. But I think we need clarity on the mandate of the Auditor General to be able to do that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Further debate? Yes, Madame Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I can answer your question, actually. In fact, I could share the response that I got from the Auditor General, because when I first wrote, I wasn't sure if that fell within her mandate. Yes, it does fall within her mandate, because all of those physicians bill OHIP. So the idea is really, are they billing OHIP and also billing the patients through the \$400, \$600 or \$5,000 that they ask? Because we're dealing solely with primary care, solely with physician practice, all of them bill OHIP.

There is a role to play for the Auditor General. I will share the letter and you can see that she has already looked into this to clarify that it was within her mandate.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Further debate?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'm speaking in favour of this motion. I believe that this government and this committee has a responsibility to provide transparency, accountability and make sure that Ontarians aren't getting gouged for their health care needs within primary care. It's really quite simple: During a cost-of-living crisis, it's incumbent upon all of us to protect Ontarians. During the COVID-19 crisis, I think we all remember that the Premier himself said that he would be an 800-pound gorilla on the backs of people who were gouging others for prices, yet we saw no action actually protecting consumers.

We need to make sure that people are protected in accessing their basic health care needs within primary care, and I strongly, strongly urge this committee to act and have the Auditor General conduct this special audit.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir, for that.

Further debate? Are we ready to vote?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Recorded vote.

Ayes

Collard, Gélinas, Kernaghan.

Nays

Bouma, Crawford, Kanapathi, MacLeod, Scott, Laura Smith.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): The vote is lost on the motion.

I'm going to recess the committee for five minutes so that we can enter closed session to conduct report writing.

The committee recessed at 1241 and later continued in closed session.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

Ms. Catherine Fife (Waterloo ND)

Clerk / Greffière

Ms. Tanzima Khan

Staff / Personnel

Mr. Dmitry Granovsky, research officer,
Research Services

Ms. Lauren Warner, research officer,
Research Services