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# The “Demographic Tsunami” Meme and Canadian Media Coverage

**“Boomerangst”—Myths and Realities about Health Care for an Aging Population 22 Feb, 2011**

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Mememes shape our worldview...

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## What is a meme?

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“A meme is defined as any unit of cultural information, such as a practice or idea, that is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another.”

Sir Richard Dawkins coined the word meme (the behavioral equivalent of a gene) to describe how Darwinian principles might be extended to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomenon.  
(source: wikipedia)



## American writer Malcolm Gladwell on memes

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“A meme behaves like a virus—that moves through a population, taking hold in each person it infects.”



## American writer Mark Twain

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“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”



## The MMR-autism meme

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“Through reporting as shamelessly biased as this, British journalists have done their job extremely well. People make health decisions based on what they read in the newspapers, and MMR uptake has plummeted from 92% to 73%...”

Ben Goldacre in [MMR, bad science](#),



# “The Media always gets things wrong...”

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- Sins include:
  - wrong about the facts;
  - misquoting spokespeople;
  - misinterpreting data, or;
  - confusing evidence with expert opinion.
- But those sins are minor transgressions, the BIG sin is in transmitting the memes that are just plain wrong.
- By transmitting, applying, and by repetition, strengthening a meme that is simply wrong can have a very corrosive effect on public perceptions of health care issues.



# One particularly virulent meme: The “Greying Tsunami”

Canadians over 65 represent a “demographic tsunami” set to wreak a path of destruction through Canadian’s universal healthcare system.



CHSRF MYTHBUSTER, January 2002



“In the three-and-a-half years that I spent as Health Minister in this province, I can tell you that was something that was very much in our minds, **the looming senior tsunami** and the implications that it's going to have on health care in British Columbia and health care in Canada...”

MLA Colin Hansen  
speech to the BC Securities Commission, Oct. 21, 2008



***“The aging population  
will overwhelm medicare”***

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***"That gloomy prediction persists in the face of increasingly persuasive evidence that aging has never been and is not likely to be the ruin of the system”***

***Saskatchewan commissioner Kenneth Fyke***

Thomas Walkom. Aging boomers not nemesis of medicare ; 'Crisis' not borne out by research as people stay healthier longer. [Toronto Star, Sept 8, 2001](#)



1. How often does the “Greying Tsunami” appear in Canada’s newspapers?

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2. How often is it linked to healthcare sustainability?

3. Does reportage of the “Greying Tsunami” offer alternative hypotheses?

# Proquest, Lexis-Nexis SEARCH METHODS

Search term: "Aging of the Population"

Dates: Jan 1990 – Dec 2010

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1,364 ARTICLES

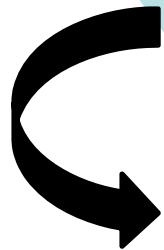
634 ARTICLES


132  
ARTICLES

75  
ARTICLES

Does the content  
concern health  
care?

Does the article present  
an alternative  
hypothesis?



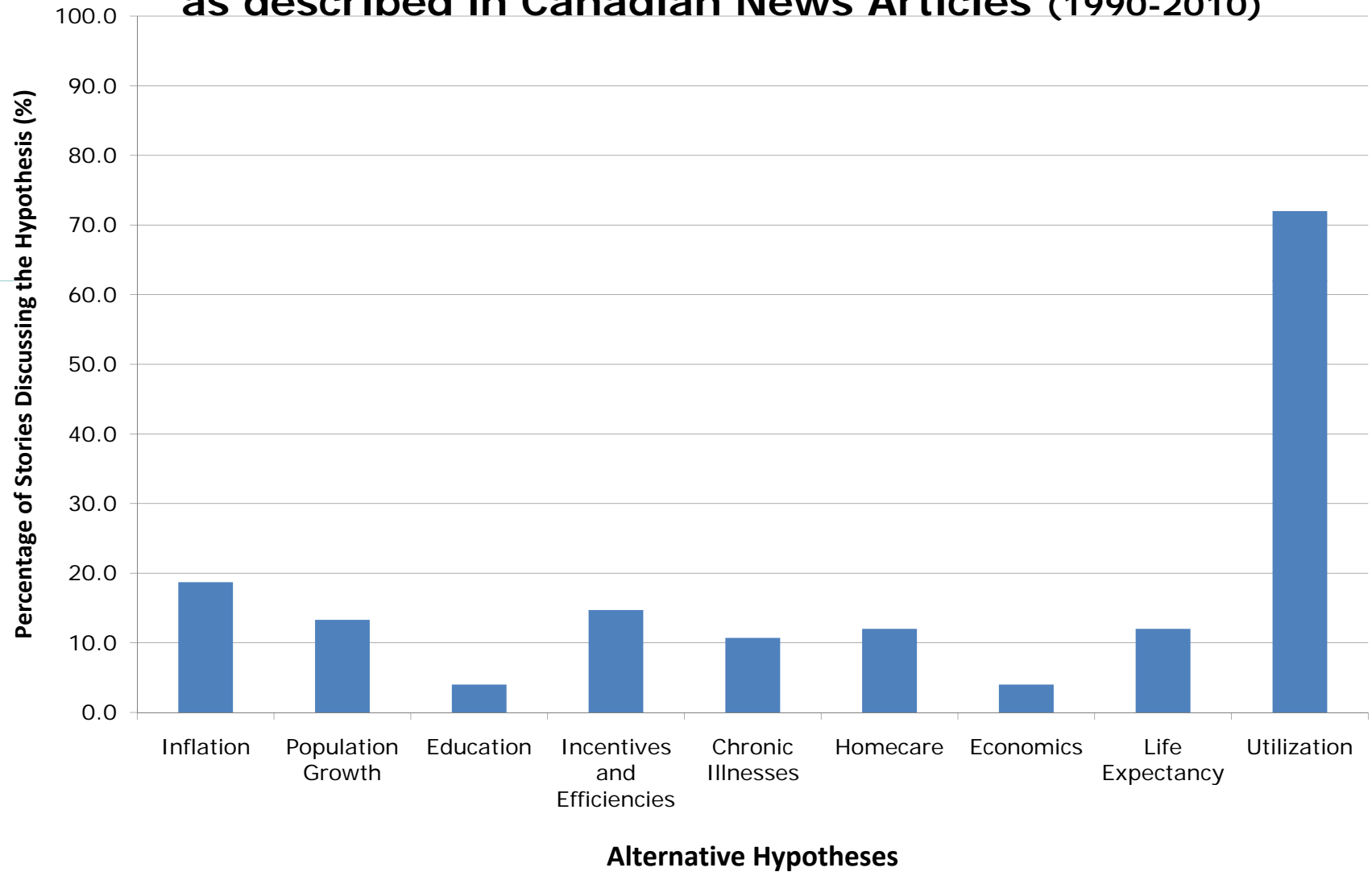


# What alternatives to the “Greying Tsunami” meme are put forward?

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<b>Alternative Hypothesis</b>	<b>No. of Stories that Mentioned these alternative hypotheses (n=75)</b>	<b>Percentage of Stories that Mentioned the Hypothesis</b>
Utilization	54	72.0%
Inflation	14	18.7%
Incentives & Efficiencies	11	14.7%
Population Growth	10	13.3%
Homecare	9	12.0%
Life Expectancy	9	12.0%
Chronic Illnesses	8	10.7%
Economics	3	4.0%
Education	3	4.0%

## Alternative Contributors to Rising Health Care Costs as described in Canadian News Articles (1990-2010)





# What were the 'news hooks?'

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June 2010: Andrew Ramlo and Ryan Berlin's paper titled *"Sustainable: British Columbia's Health Care System and Our Aging Population. (Urban Futures report)"*

- May 2010: TD Bank, *"Charting a path to Sustainable Health Care in Ontario."*
- Feb 2010: Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page *"The Fiscal Sustainability Report"*
- Nov 2009: The Fraser Institute, *"Paying More, Getting Less."*
- March 2009: IMS Health, *"IMS Health Reports Retail Prescription Volume Grew 7.1 Percent in 2008."*
- Feb 2009: Health Council of Canada *"Value for Money: Making Canadian Health Care Stronger."*
- Nov 2006: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *"Population aging not a demographic time bomb for health care costs: economist"*
- Jan 2005: Certified General Accountants Association of Canada, *"Growing Up: The Social and Economic Implications of an Aging Population."*
- Nov 2002: Roy Romanow, Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada.
- Oct 2002: Seamus & Sarah Hogan, *"How Will the Ageing of the Population Affect Health Care Needs and Costs in the Foreseeable Future?"*
- Jan 2002: CHSRF Mythbuster publication
- April 2001: Kenneth Fyke, The Fyke Report, *"The Commission on Medicare."*
- May 1998: CMAJ paper by Noralou Roos et al. *"How many physicians does Canada need to care for our aging population?"*





Urban Futures Institute report:  
**"Sustainable: British Columbia's Health  
Care System and Our Aging Population."**

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Examined provincial health spending over the past 30 years, from **1979 to 2009**. During that 30-year period, public spending in British Columbia jumped to \$15.6-billion from \$1.6-billion.)

Four factors accounted for those increases:

- \* Population growth - 7 per cent;
- \* **Aging of the population - 14 per cent;**
- \* Inflation - 19 per cent;
- \* **Increased utilization - 59 per cent.**



# Critical reporting

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"Given the time lags involved, Canadian policy makers and organizations must act now," the Conference Board said in documents to support their recommendations. We have at most 10 years before the accelerating ageing of the population will begin to significantly undermine economic performance and social well-being."

Paul Vieira, Ottawa warned to act now to combat ageing populace: Senate hearings Financial Post. Oct. 20, 2005, Pg. FP7

- “Nobody disputes healthcare costs increase with more old people. But....
- “‘It won’t swamp the system. In fact, the impact of the aging population will actually be quite small,’ says Morris Barer, a health economist at the University of British Columbia: ‘about one per cent each year in total healthcare costs for the whole population.’”



# A role for health services researchers?

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Media analysis is a necessary tool to understand how people think or don't think about issues.

The general public might have developed mental shortcuts on issues that seem plausible and common sense but don't square with the evidence.

It is necessary not only to expose and perhaps counter prevalent health care myths, but should health system researchers be on the front lines to counter new dangerous memes which arise?

How can we undo the meme's damage? Offer up another one.

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# Different memes will make you seek different different solutions.

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**The Greying Tsunami is going to crush our health care system.**

*Therefore we need people to pay more privately...*

**OR**

**Seniors *AND everyone else* are getting much more treatment than they used to get.**

*Therefore maybe we could focus on reducing unnecessary health care utilization...*



# Is Disease Mongering causing the rise in screening, diagnostic tests, physician services and drug costs?

Normal human conditions such as high cholesterol, male and female hormonal changes, thinning bones, reduced sexual desire, and so on have been colonized as pharmaceutical markets



## Examples of health services that have increased over the last two decades?

### Screening tests

- In 1994 Alberta Health paid for 2,500 bone density tests\*
- In 1996 it paid for 13,000 (after the launch of a brand new osteoporosis drug)
- In 2000 it paid for 90,000 tests
- A 2600% increase over six years for a procedure that is not proven to prevent osteoporotic fractures.
  - (\*As quoted in Moynihan, Cassels, Selling Sickness, 2005)





## Examples of health services that have increased over the last two decades?

### Diagnostic tests

- In 2009, there were 266 MRI and 465 CT scanners in Canada, representing an increase of 70% and 36% respectively since 2004.\*
- More scanners means more scans, not all of which we know are being done appropriately.
- Excessive scanning does not prevent cancer. It can cause it.

(\* Source: CIHI)




## Examples of health services that have increased over the last two decades?

### Physician services

- Between 2008 and 2009, Canada's physician supply increased by 4.1%, more than triple the growth of the Canadian population (1.2%)\*.
- More doctors mean more doctor visits.
- In Quebec, between 1982 and 1992, the proportion of seniors grew from 8.9 to 11.2 percent, while their costs of physician services more than doubled.

(\*Source: CIHI)




## Examples of health services that have increased over the last two decades?

### Pharmaceuticals

- Out of 23 countries in the OECD Canada has the second-highest level of total per capita drug spending.\*
- Our \$30 billion per year drug bill grows at a rate of about \$2 billion per year.

(\*Source: CIHI)



“Canada's medicare system is not  
threatened by a silver tsunami of aging  
baby boomers...”

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“It is threatened by a tsunami of “more, more, more.” It is threatened by an unwillingness to ask if more intense, more expensive care is appropriate or necessary, and a reluctance to reallocate dollars to strategies that work and to cut (or off-load) those that do not.

Aging is inevitable, but thoughtless health inflation is not. So we should lay off the granny-bashing and start making some tough choices.”

ANDRÉ PICARD, Globe and Mail, Nov 11, 2010



## Summary

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- Many factors will influence how memes live or die
- The media is an important source of information and shapes peoples' thinking in ways that are sometimes contrary to their best interests.
- We can work with the media to shape healthier memes.



# How to contact me:

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