

Mental Health Clinic facing funding crisis regional councillors told

Signs of drastic underfunding are showing at the North Halton Mental Health Clinic, regional councillors heard at its regular meeting, recently.

But, requests for increased funding from the Ministry of Health have been denied for two years running.

Most recently, Halton asked for \$732,000 for the clinic's 2000-2001 budget.

It currently receives \$517,000.

The additional cash would have brought three more front-line therapists to the clinic, which is 100 per cent Ministry-funded and serves Halton Hills and Milton.

The clinic handles about 800 cases per

year, a number which could soar as growth hits Milton.

But the plumped-up budget was denied.

"Nothing has frustrated me more over the past 10 years than dealing with the ministry on this issue," said Halton's Medical Officer of Health Dr. Bob Nosal. "There is less funding and less full-time equivalents than there were 10 years ago."

Currently there are about five full-time therapists and four hourly psychiatrists working in the clinic.

And for the past two years, the psychiatrists have accepted a 60 per cent pay cut for the month of March—a situation they say can't happen again.

But the workload isn't easing, and the coffers are empty, said Nosal.

Currently the clinic's staff-patient ratio, which should ideally be at about 1:30, is 1:70 instead. And a two-month waiting list is in effect.

According to Nosal, the province contends it has already sunk millions of dollars into Halton's health care.

But that money hasn't eased the crunch at the clinic, he said.

"We're expected to pick up all the rest," said Nosal. "With the dollars we've been given now, that's just not possible."

And there are other costs to deal with.

"That clinic needs furniture, it needs computers," said Nosal. To cope, Halton

staff have even advised running a deficit at the clinic.

Halton Hills Regional Councillor John Day wondered if the province could be put on notice of the situation while the clinic runs a deficit.

And he asked that other agencies be brought in to lobby the province for help.

Mental health clinics in other areas are also suffering from a critical cash shortage, acknowledged Halton CAO Brent Marshall.

"It's a generic problem and I know the pressure's on," he said.

He asked for time to approach organizations such as the Associations of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) to

gauge its concern about the issue.

At its meeting, council voted to bring the issue to the next Regional Mayors and Chairs meeting, and to schedule a meeting with the ministry to lobby for funding.

"The intent is to seek additional support," said Day.

AMO is currently sorting through funding issues in a host of areas, said Oakville Mayor and AMO president Ann Mulvale.

"We're trying to re-define who pays for what," she said. "Currently we're funding the responsibilities of other levels of government here."

A rush for clinic services is the inevitable fallout of years of government policies, said Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

"There has been almost 20 years of de-institutionalization policies," she said. "This is partly a result of that."

—By Irene Gentle, special

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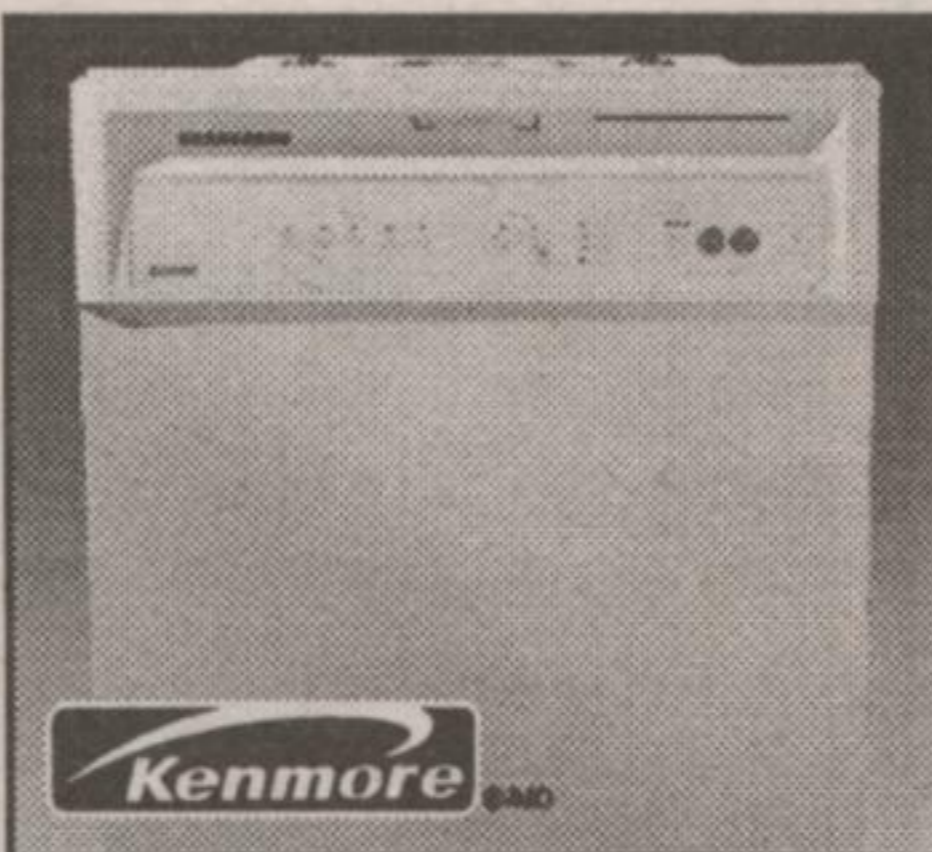
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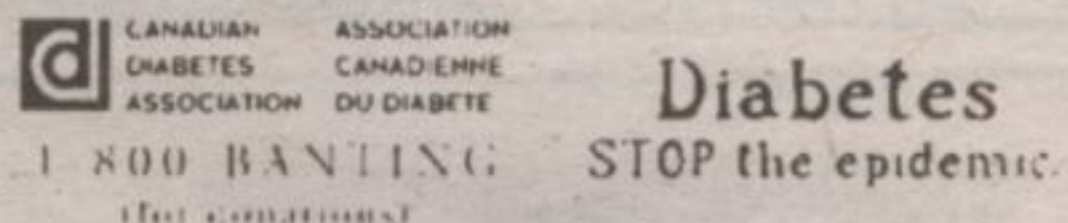
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Optometrist Offers Halloween Safety Tips

Halloween takes place during Eye Health Canada Month, and optometrists are taking this opportunity to offer parents some eye and vision advice to help ensure children are kept safe and healthy during the festivities.

Unfortunately, Halloween accidents are common. "A dark setting, dark costumes, masks that obstruct vision, and children running around excitedly at parties or during trick-or-treating - these factors often set a dangerous stage."

The Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends that parents encourage their children to wear makeup instead of masks, and to ensure that costumes are well marked with reflective tape. Also, younger children should always be accompanied by an older sibling or an adult, and be encouraged to return home early. Sending children out with bright flashlights is another excellent way to ensure both that kids can see and be seen, particularly by motorists.

In the selection of Halloween makeup, care should be taken to use non-allergenic, water-soluble products, and to use caution during removal. A gentle cold cream or eye makeup remover product, free of dyes or perfumes should be gently swabbed over and below the lids.

Happy Halloween
Dr. Caroline Teske, Optometrist
99 Sinclair Ave. #310 Georgetown
702-1616