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goodness
sake . . .



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tip from
Milton District
Hospital

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'Orphan patients' left to use hospital emergency rooms

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

A severe shortage of family doctors in the community has led to a growing trend of "orphan patients" at Milton District Hospital, said Halton Healthcare Services (HHS) Chief of Staff Dr. Lorne Martin.

HHS operates the amalgamated Milton District and Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial hospitals.

Traditionally, patients arriving at the hospital for care are treated by their general practitioner (GP).

But a lack of available family doctors has led to more and more patients turning up at emergency rooms "orphaned" — or without a link to a family physician.

Currently, unaffiliated patients are simply assigned a family doctor at the hospital.

But that is putting an unfair burden on already overtaxed GPs, said Dr. Martin.

"If you are coming to Milton emergency and you are sick, we still have to look after you," he said. "The work load is becoming unmanageable."

Ideally, Milton should have approximately 32 GPs, or one for every 1,500 residents, said Dr. Martin.

But instead there are 16, and they are spread thin, he added.

"In Milton, their practices are completely full," said Dr. Martin. "They are working right at their capacity."

In Oakville, the doctor/patient ratio is about right, but it is poised to tip in the wrong direction with upcoming growth.

The concern, said Dr. Martin, is Ontario-wide, caused by a grim shortage of doctors in the province.

Government policies that at one time slashed enrolment spaces in medical schools combined with a stream of physicians headed south of the border have contributed to the predicament, he said.

And at the same time, patient needs have risen.

"We've had the predicted aging of the population," said Dr. Martin. "The patients we look after in the hospital are much sicker than they used to be."

But a funding formula devised in the 1970s dictates that doctors are able to bill more in their family practices than they can for hospital work, said Dr. Martin.

That means it is more lucrative for them to opt out of hospital work altogether.

And that further swells the ranks of orphan patients.

"It is economically better for physicians just to work in the community," he said. "But it increases the numbers of those unaffiliated patients."

So far, all Milton doctors have opted to remain in the hospital.

And that leads to the best possible treatment, said Dr. Martin.

The reason is that the family doctor has an established relationship with the patient and is familiar with their medical history.

"And it makes for a better physician," said Dr. Martin. "That doctor is working in emergency. You are seeing a real talented and skilled individual."

To study the issue, a task force was recently pulled together at HHS. They are hoping to return with some solutions within four months. One option the task force will be looking into is hiring a hospital physician specifically to care for unaffiliated patients.

But the real answer has to come from the provincial government, said Dr. Martin.

"It is very difficult for us to try and solve the physician shortage problem," he said. "We are hoping it can be addressed at a provincial-level."

In the meantime, all patients will continue to receive care at the hospital, assured Dr. Martin.

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