

Hospitals hoping to avoid holiday crunch next year

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

The worst is probably over for Halton's beleaguered emergency departments, the Region's health and social services committee heard last week.

And a team of local health care trouble-shooters are hoping to prevent a similar crunch from developing next year, said Scott McLeod, senior health planner with the Halton/Peel District Health Council (HPDHC).

"The peak activity actually seems to have passed," he said. "We've struggled our way through another year."

The relief is largely due to a provincial infusion of \$196 million aimed at propping up Ontario's hamstrung health system.

The December 23 announcement awarded \$5.5 million to Halton Healthcare Services (HHS) and \$1.2 million to Joseph-Brant Memorial Hospital.

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

The cash will be used to beef up nursing staff, as well as the numbers of acute care, rehabilitation and long-term-care beds.

The annual holiday emergency

"We've struggled our way through another year."

SCOTT MCLEOD

room gridlock is caused by a combination of factors, said Mr. McLeod.

"What you're seeing in the emergency department is not really an emergency department problem," he said. "Current activities far exceed what the buildings were planned for."

And that deficit becomes more noticeable over Christmas when many doctor's offices and clinics shut down.

"Physicians are off and their recordings will say go to the emergency department, essentially," said Mr. McLeod.

The crisis is worsened by a scarcity of long-term-care beds in the region.

"Because we can't move patients out into long-term-care facilities, you end up with bed block," he said. "You can't move people from the emergency department into a bed."

And a discrepancy between ambulance and hospital procedures hasn't helped.

"The hospital has a five-point triage system and the ambulance has a five-point triage system," explained Mr. McLeod. "And they are exactly opposite."

To tackle the problem, the HPDHC hosted a series of meetings with health professionals such as hospital CEOs, Regional health department staff, Halton Community Care Access Centre employees and front line hospital workers last December.

The meetings were called at the direction of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care with the aim of finding ways to get through the busy season.

"The message at that point from the CEO group is there is no long-term solution unless we can address the capacity and staffing issues," said Mr. McLeod. "These were coping strategies, not long-term strategies."

And though the Provincial funds will go a long way toward easing the situation, the effects won't likely be felt until next year.

"The spike at Christmas time and the new year is traditional, but everyone seems to be surprised when it happens," said Mr. McLeod.

"Knowing this happens every year, let's anticipate it a little better next year."



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