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HHS looks to upgrade ERs to keep SARS away

By JASON MISNER

The Champion

Halton Healthcare Services (HHS) is looking to spend between \$200,000 and \$300,000 to upgrade the emergency rooms at Milton District and Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial hospitals to better protect staff and patients from future potential SARS cases.

But construction largely relies on the government reimbursing HHS for at least the \$900,600 it's spent to battle the spread of the stubborn respiratory illness since the spring — a decision no one is clear as to when it will be made.

"We're looking at redesigning the emergency rooms to manage SARS, making sure somebody who does come in potentially contagious that we have a way to segregate them in the emergency room (ER)," said HHS CEO and President John Oliver.

HHS oversees the Milton and Oakville hospitals.

The bulk of the proposed work involves creating a negative pressure room at the Milton ER. When negative pressure exists, a continuous air current enters a room under a door, which prevents airborne particles from escaping into the corridor.

Oakville has a negative pressure room.

"There are some changes in Oakville but the bigger changes are in Milton," Mr. Oliver said.

He would like them completed by the fall before the start of cold weather.

But the budget is already squeezed for capital improvements and the money paid out to battle SARS has further tightened it.

"We're very tight on allocating for capital expenditures," said Monique Porlier, HHS's vice-president of finances and information systems. "We'll be very challenged to prioritize that (the ER construction projects) against other needs for patient care (without government reimbursement)."

HHS officials have been in contact with the Ministry of Health on a weekly basis regarding the status of potential SARS reimbursement. But at this point, Mr. Oliver said he has "no idea" when the government will make a decision whether to pay hospitals back all or some of the money forked out to fight the spread of SARS.

"We know they're aware of the issues and we remain hopeful we will get reimbursed," he said, noting expenses have been filed with the Province.

HHS has said earlier that it accumulated a total of more than \$1.3 million in costs and losses due to the impact of SARS, which came in two waves between March and early June.

HHS and other Ontario hospitals were required to follow a host of mandatory directives from the Province to prevent the spread of SARS. As a result, staff overtime, extra security, masks and other needs to deal with SARS infection control cost HHS \$900,600.

And the two hospitals also lost \$460,000 in revenue from sources like parking, cafeterias and gift shops because of fewer visitors to the hospitals.

HHS officials are still tallying up the final costs and losses including the second wave of SARS.

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