

Emergency care faster by calling 911, says doctor

Many residents with heart attack symptoms being driven to hospital

By Tim Foran
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Leave the car at home and take the better way — an ambulance.

That's the message to local residents from the doctor overseeing Halton's paramedics division.

An estimated 50 per cent of people experiencing chest pain or other symptoms of a myocardial infarction, also known as a heart attack, continue to be driven to hospital by friends or family, Dr.

Sheldon Cheskes — medical director for Halton and Peel region for the Sunnybrook-Osler Centre for Pre-Hospital Care — told Halton's health committee recently.

Treatment is faster by calling 911 and waiting for paramedics to arrive and start diagnosis and treatment, said Cheskes.

"That's the mindset that really has to move down to the citizens," he told the committee.

Part of the problem might be confusion amongst the public, who

perhaps associate a heart attack with cardiac arrest.

"When a person stops breathing and the heart stops beating, then a person is experiencing cardiac arrest," explains the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario's website. "It is not a heart attack, which occurs when the blood supply to the heart is slowed or stopped because of a blockage."

"Some heart attacks are sudden and intense — the 'movie heart attack,' where no one doubts what's

happening. But most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected aren't sure what's wrong and wait too long before getting help," the American Heart Association (AHA) states on its website.

The AHA points out paramedics can start treatment up to an hour sooner than if someone gets to the hospital by car.

After receiving dispatch, Halton's ambulance division was one of the fastest in the province to arrive at the emergency scene, according to 2007 statistics.

"Paramedics are trained to treat (heart attack) patients with a variety of medications including oxygen, ASA (acetylsalicylic acid), nitroglycerine and morphine," states Greg Sage, acting director of land ambulance services for Halton Region, in a report to the health committee.

Paramedics are also trained to obtain a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG), a diagnostic tool for cardiac-related conditions.

Since December 15, 2008, Halton's advanced care paramedics have had the authority to interpret the ECG without a doctor's assistance and transport patients in Oakville, Milton and Georgetown who are suffering from a ST-elevation myocardial infarction, or STEMI, directly to the regional cardiac care centre at Mississauga's Trillium Health Centre, bypassing local hospitals. At Trillium, interventional cardiologists insert a balloon catheter and stent to open up the patient's blocked artery, a procedure commonly called an angioplasty and which is deemed more

effective than clot busting medications. Halton's paramedics transported 41 STEMI patients to Trillium in the first year of the new protocol.

Halton is hoping to finalize soon an agreement for its paramedics to run the same protocol for Burlington's STEMI patients, who would be transported to the cardiac care centre at Hamilton General Hospital.

Given the success of the STEMI program and the benefits of rapid treatment by paramedics of myocardial infarction, Halton staff are working with staff in other regions and local hospitals to increase public awareness of the importance of calling 911 when a person is experiencing chest pain or other heart attack symptoms.

Cheskes is also recommending more residents receive cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training.

The survival rate of cardiac arrest is four times greater if a bystander performs CPR, he explained to the health committee.

While Cheskes said the increasing prevalence of public access defibrillators at public facilities was welcome, he said CPR training is especially important due to the fact 85 per cent of cardiac arrests take place in the home.

The Region's emergency medical services division offers courses in both CPR and defibrillator training for workplaces or groups. Its website, www.halton.ca/health, also provides links to other course providers.

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