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Board superintendent says...

School nurse cuts are bleeding prevention dry

By NORMAN NELSON

School board officials are incensed at a reduction in the time spent at Halton's high schools by public health nurses.

In previous years, public health nurses spent half a day at area high schools, but for this school year it was cut in half to five half-days every two weeks.

A recommendation before a Halton Regional Council meeting today calls for a slight increase to six half-days every two weeks.

But it's still not satisfactory, said Gary Crossman, superintendent of instructional services with the Halton Board of Education.

"There was no consultation," he said. "They just cut us back half of what we had."

The board, he said, has continued to lobby for full time public health nurses in the high schools since service was cut from a full day to a half a day more than a decade ago. The board's protests gradually weakened for one reason, he said: "Why keep hitting your head against the wall."

Principals appalled

"When they cut the half in half (in September)," he said, "the high school principals were appalled... It seemed to be done without an understanding of the value of the public health nurse in the school. It disturbs me... It leaves us wondering about the priority of those making the decision and about the process."

The public health nurses, he said, provide two important functions to high schools — assisting teachers with health care instruction, and advising individual students on their physical and mental health needs.

Burlington councillor Walter Mulkewich, at the health services committee meeting which approved the recommendation last week, said "I'd hate to see the service go below the traditional level (of half a day)."

The nurses, he said, provide a valuable preventative role, advising students on personal hygiene and a healthy lifestyle. "Council talks prevention," he said, "but they don't put their money where their mouth is." Money channelled into preventative education, he said, could save a lot more down the road.

Halton's medical officer of health, Dr. Graham Pollett, in his report to committee, said the reduction was made in September "due to staffing and economic constraints within the the Preventive Services section."

No first aid

Also taken into consideration, he said, was

the fact that since 1983 public health nurses are no longer responsible for first aid, and instead concentrate on primary prevention and health promotion.

Such activities include smoking prevention, sexuality education, counselling and teaching of health related topics.

The report to committee concluded that "the role of the public health nurse in Halton schools is as a consultant and direct service provider in the areas of health promotion and disease prevention."

"Given this legislated mandate, together with the limited staff complement of public health nurses and the significant time commitment made to Halton schools, the role of the school nurse must remain focused in this regard. With neither the mandate nor the resources to provide such 'hands on' services as first aid or medical administration, it is not possible for

the Health Department to deliver these services."

However, Mr. Crossman doesn't accept either arguments. As far as a shortage of staff, he said "the staff was there the year before, and the year before..."

As far as the change in mandate for the public health nurses, he labelled the argument a 'red herring' since it's been that way since 1983.

Prevention most important

Dr. Pollett, in an interview, agreed the staffing situation "is less than satisfactory in that we feel the preventative approach is the most important strategy in helping people to attain the best health possible."

He explained that overall in the region, there's one nurse for every 19,000 residents where ideally it should be one in 17,000, and for schools there's one nurse for 7,000 students where ideally it should be one in 4,000.

After the meeting, Gayle MacKay, the health department's director of preventative health services, said that to bring the regional nursing complement up to optimum levels would require about 20 additional nurses to the present staff of about 40.

She told committee members that "staff is very stretched" and that the situation, if unchecked, "will affect morale."

Dr. Pollett reiterated that the reduction in time spent by health nurses in the high schools in no way affects other services to the schools such as immunization services, dental health education, home care services and consultation for curriculum planning.

Funds for sexual assault clinic

The provincial government has unveiled a new strategy in an attempt to combat sexual assault that includes additional funding for the Halton Rape Crisis Centre.

Funding of \$28.8 million will be provided over a five-year period to expand efforts to prevent violent crimes against women, said Halton Centre MPP Barbara Sullivan.

The new strategy has three key components.

"The plan includes increased funding to improve services for victims," she said. "It addresses the need to provide additional resour-

ces to assist victims and witnesses during the court process, and it will intensify the awareness effort as we try to change attitudes towards sexual assault."

More than \$24 million will go towards services to victims, including funds to stabilize the 20 sexual assault crisis centres in Ontario.

"The government has made a commitment to raise the total annual funding for our sexual assault/rape crisis centres from its current level of \$600,000 to \$1.8 million annually within two years," Ms Sullivan said.



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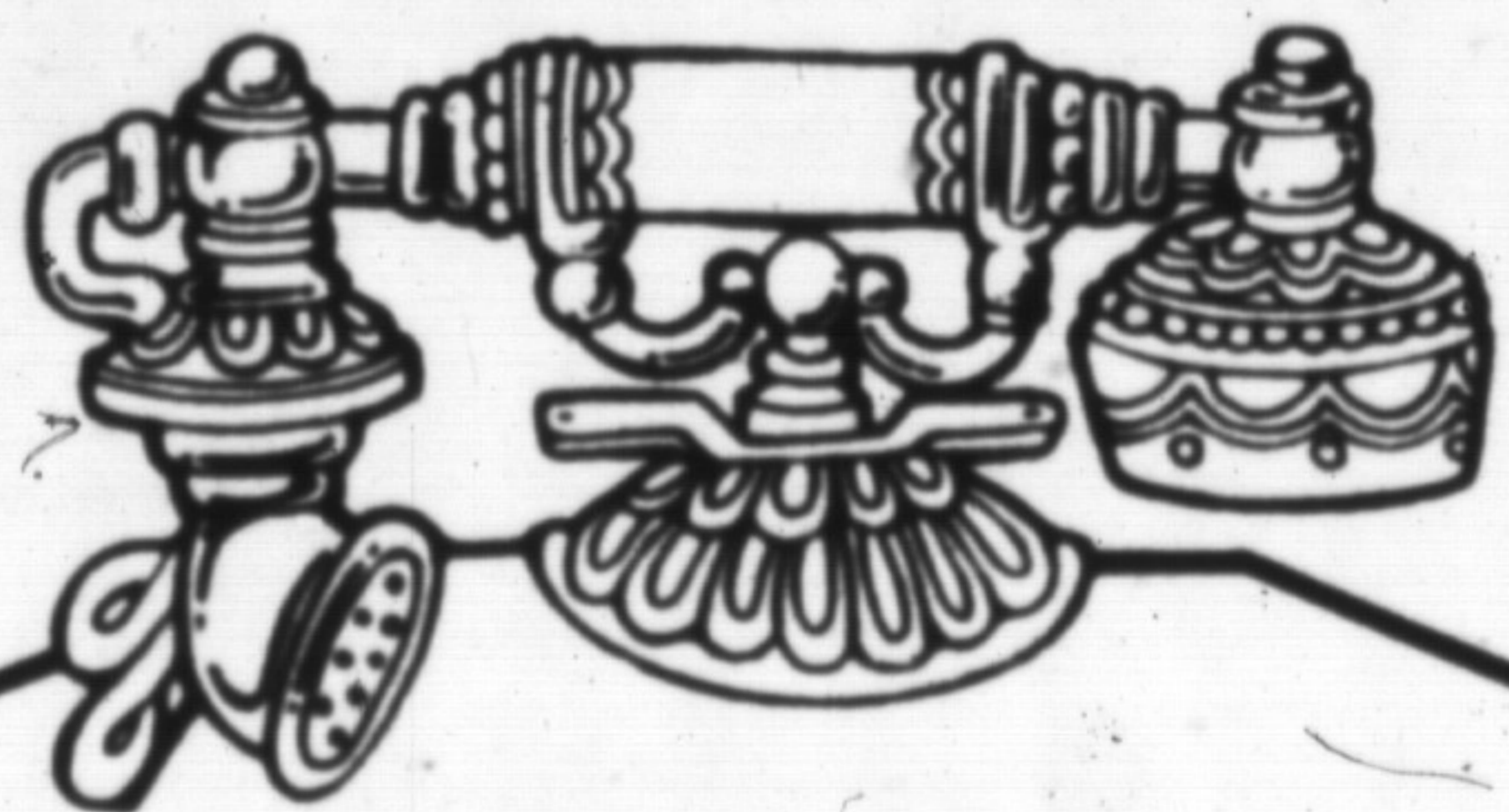
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