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Situation unsettled with doctors

By BRAD REAUME

The Champion

Unless Ontario doctors and the provincial government can agree, physicians could begin to withdraw services as early as today (Friday).

However there are so many splinter groups among Ontario doctors consensus to settle their dispute with the Ontario government, or take a unified job action, will likely prove difficult.

Dr. Garnet Maley, a Milton family physician and president of the Halton Medical Society, showed the strain during a recent interview of trying to broker a deal with provincial officials regarding working conditions which would keep his colleagues happy.

He denied reports which suggested doctors heavily favoured a job action after a meeting of Halton medics in Burlington last week. He called the Coalition of Family Physicians of Ontario, which is vehemently in favour of job action, the "lunatic fringe" of medical groups.

Dr. Maley said that the joint proposals of the Ontario Medical Association (OMA) and the provincial government were meant to show that there has been progress in negotiations. They were never meant to be voted on as if they represented a final deal.

However that is what is happening. Results from a province-wide vote by physicians were announced after press time Thursday. According to Dr. Maley the OMA will announce its intentions regarding possible job action or further negotiation after studying the voting results.

"We have made good progress in negotiations. There has been goodwill demonstrated by the doctors and by the provincial government," said Dr. Maley. "Personally, if there is a job action I will not take part and I will actively discourage others from doing so."

Regarding local opinion, Dr. Maley said as far as he knows the majority of Milton doctors are willing to allow negotiations to continue. He agreed, however, that in Halton there are doctors on both sides of the issue.

"Essentially for the last month I've been planning a strike," said Dr. Maley. "I don't think it's time to pull the trigger. We are ill prepared."

He suggests Ontario physicians allow further negotiations through a January 31 deadline and only consider job action or strikes if they are still unsatisfied then.

The joint proposal put forward to doctors and endorsed by the OMA and the province calls for reductions in billing clawbacks, changes to billing thresholds — of the total amount of money a particular doctor can bill — an agreement on funding malpractice insurance and restrictions on where doctors can practice.

It is the last point which has medical students and older doctors particularly upset. Under the scheme new doctors would be forced to practice in under-served areas, usually in northern or rural communities.

As well, established doctors may find it more difficult to sell their practices as they approach retirement because new doctors will be restricted in where they can work.

Dr. Maley said the outcome of the doctor's vote is a toss-up. He said the government is unlikely to back down on the rules governing where they will allow doctors to practice. According to Dr. Maley, Health Minister Jim Wilson has long said the government needs to get doctors into the under-served areas.

If there is no consensus among doctors regarding the potential deal, there is even less on what constitutes a job action. Dr. Maley said various groups representing doctors "are all over the map."

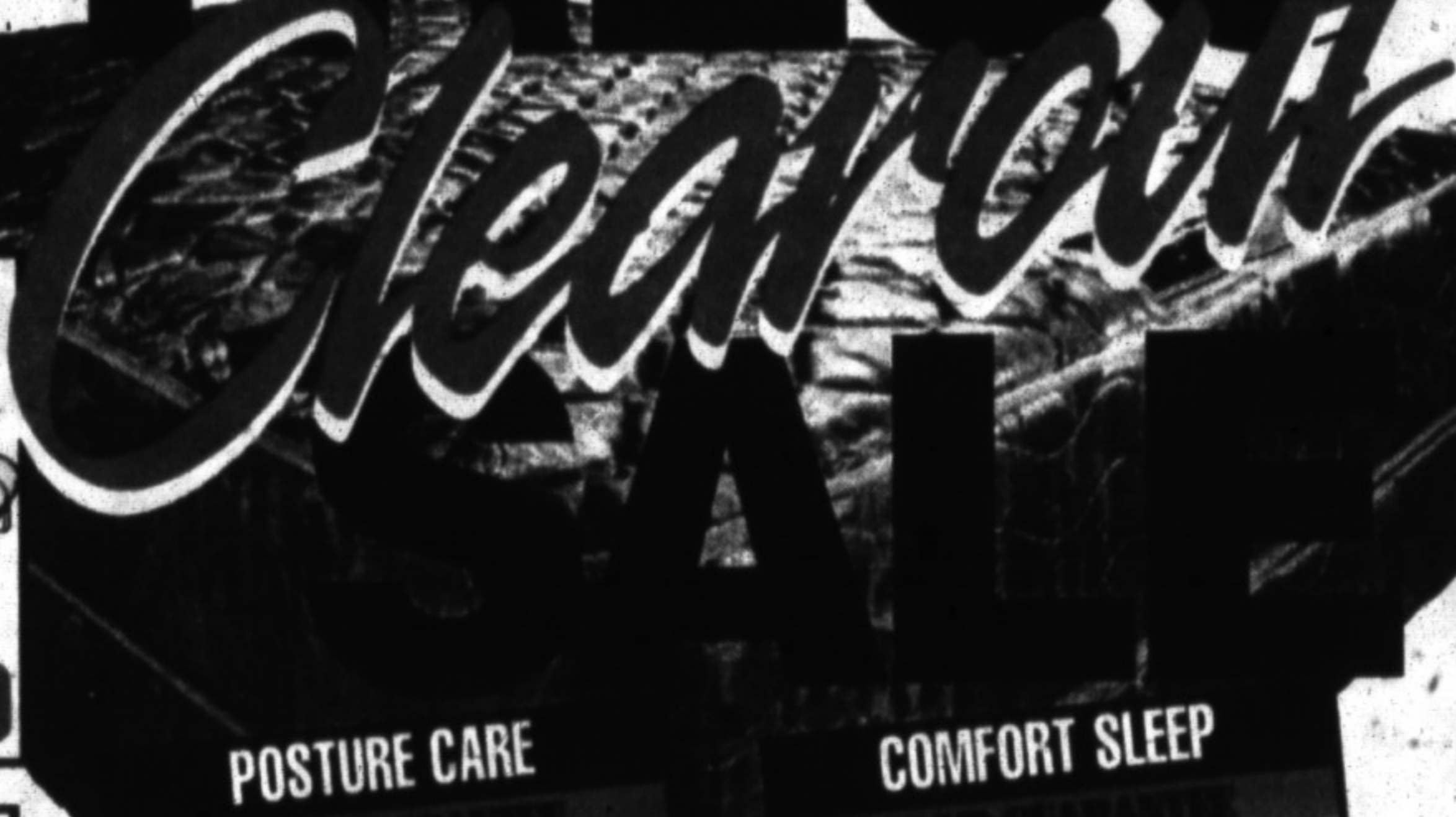


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DR. GARNET MALEY

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