

York heart patients at risk, hospital says

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Staff Reporter

A \$1.6-million laboratory sits idle at York County Hospital while health officials decide whether to grant the hospital permission to perform a common, but potentially life-saving diagnostic cardiac test.

For now, that means York Region residents who require the procedure face a two-week wait to access the same service at hospitals in Toronto.

And that doesn't make sense to Dan Carriere, the Newmarket hospital's president.

"People are literally dying waiting for these services," Carriere said. "We are going to jeopardize the lives and safety of these people without taking action."

The Ministry of Health and the region's district health council are currently reviewing York County's plan to not only offer cardiac catheterization, but the hospital's pacemaker insertion program, which was launched earlier this year without ministry approval.

Provincial officials halted the pacemaker service after York County had installed the device in nine patients.

At the hospital's annual general meeting last week, the public was invited to see the new laboratory.

Cardiac catheterization is a test used to determine where heart disease is occurring. A long, thin tube is inserted into a blood vessel in the groin or arm. The tube is then directed toward the heart and to the origin of the coronary arteries. Dye is then injected into the coronary artery while X-ray pictures are taken.

The dye is seen by the X-ray as a white line. A disruption of the white line may signify an area of build-up inside the wall of the artery.

During the open-house, hospital board chairperson Tom McPherson acknowledged the debate that has been raging over York County's decision to proceed with a cardiac centre, but said the board supports Carriere's push to be the regional centre.

"We're pioneers and pioneers are the ones with the arrows in their backs, but we believe in what you're trying to do," McPherson told Carriere.

Until the hospital receives approval to offer the test, the space containing the high-tech X-ray equipment is actually a showroom for its manufacturer, General Electric, which is using the lab to showcase its abilities to prospective clients.

Even though the lab is categorized as a demonstration suite, Carriere hopes to one day see it transformed into a functional cardiac service for York Region residents.

"We've been a site for some other cardiac services," said Carriere. "It's a natural for us and we can save the taxpayers significant dollars if we can ever convert it to a working cath lab."

So far, the hospital has only paid for a portion of the renovations to the room - about \$100,000. And that's money, Carriere says, would have been spent to renovate the space for future radiology services.

Should the hospital receive provincial approval to perform cardiac catheterization, Carriere says he can obtain the hardware for two-thirds the price tag.

Installing the heart laboratory represents another bold move by York County to become the next hospital to provide the cardiac service in the GTA.

Along with the hospital's foray into performing permanent pacemaker implants this spring, Carriere's theory is the more heart services York County can offer, the better chance it has to become the next regional cardiac centre.

But the decision over where to locate the facility rests with officials from the health council and the ministry.

York County's bid is not the only one on the table. Markham-Stouffville Hospital and York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill have proposed a lab be created for York Region residents at Sunnybrook Health Science Centre.

The argument for having a lab in a Toronto hospital is based on the need to have expert surgical backup available should complications arise.

However, York-Mackenzie MPP Frank Klees doesn't support the proposal.

"It doesn't make sense to me to have York Region residents being sent to Sunnybrook for services if the demand is here," Klees said. "Certainly Dan Carriere and others feel a cath lab is important not only to York County, but to York Region and I've expressed my support for that kind of diagnostic equipment."

"York County's taken the initiative here and I'll continue to support that."

Instead of waging a divided battle for different sites, Klees says the three York Region hospitals should lobby as a united front.

A meeting will be held next month with all hospitals in York Region and Simcoe County to review where cardiac services should be located.

But while studies over who should offer the service continue, Carriere says patients are suffering. Three cardiologists in Newmarket currently have 46 patients waiting for cardiac catheterization.

"We're going to process ourselves right out of this competition," Carriere said. "We have to develop the program now to be in business in two years."

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