

**HEALTH CARE:** Regions hire consultant to review how ambulance service is provided

# Privatization threat alarms paramedics

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
STAFF WRITER

Paramedic John Murray will be keeping a watchful eye on a review of ambulance services that begins this fall.

York, Durham and Halton regions have hired a Toronto consulting firm to review land ambulance service needs in the 905 area.

The joint review, to be completed by the end of the year by I.B.I. Consultants, will look at the cost of providing services, alternative delivery methods, assessment of the best providers and cost-sharing options with other regions.

"We are concerned about who our employer will be and how secure is our job going to be," said Murray, union steward of the York County Hospital ambulance service and a paramedic for the past 12 years — 10 in York Region.

York Region taxpayers have been paying for the cost of land ambulance since January because of provincial downloading. Full management responsibility will be implemented by 2000.

The region is now covered by a patchwork of ambulance services made up of York County Hospital Ambulance, Nobleton Ambulance Service, Beaverton and District Ambulance, Uxbridge-Stouffville Ambulance and Ministry of Health Ambulance.

Murray says paramedics are concerned the end result of the review will mean privatization with a company not interested in fulfilling current employment standards.

"It's the concern of most guys around here," Murray said.

Right now, the hospital is Murray's



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Paramedic John Murray fears privatization could lead to service cutbacks.

employer but once the region assumes full responsibility of ambulance services, things could change.

"The region has to decide who is going to run the show," he said, noting that two big players are considered the most likely candidates — Laidlaw and Rural Metro.

At York County, the hourly wage of a paramedic ranges from \$17 to \$18.31, but other paramedics, organized under Ontario Public Service Employees Union, earn \$19.54 an hour.

"The fear is (private companies) will be harder to negotiate with," he said. "Some have been known to gut collective agreements and eliminate full-time positions."

Those involved in co-ordinating ambulance services in the region say they hope the review will call for increased training for paramedics, who need advanced life support training — especially when more than 14,000 of the 34,000 calls made last year were life threatening.

"For us, it comes down to providing good patient care and ensuring the level of care will be maintained and, if possible, increased level of training for paramedics in York Region," says Merideth Morrison, program manager of the York Region base hospital program at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

"Whoever is chosen, they have to bring in all the stakeholders — the paramedics, the base hospital, police, fire and the hospitals," she said.

Morrison says paramedics in Toronto, Halton, Durham and Peterborough have advanced life saving training not available to York Region paramedic services. When the Ontario Pre-Hospital Advance Life Support program was funded by the Ministry of Health in 1994, the base hospital in York had not been established.

"We are surrounded by those communities, and some are smaller communities than ours, and they have a higher level of service," said Morrison.

York's ambulance personnel can now administer five drugs in the field for asthma, chest pain, allergic reactions and low blood sugar and can provide defibrillation — a shocking of the heart to return it to normal rhythm. But they can't insert a breathing tube into an airway to assist patients having difficulty breathing or inject the intravenous drugs a cardiac victim needs.

"In other areas, they can intubate, start an intravenous line and give life-saving medications like epinephrin and atropine for cardiac arrest," said Morrison.

But Murray says there is little motivation for local paramedics to upgrade their skills and take on new responsibilities.

Boosting the skills of paramedics will save the system money in the long run, Morrison argues. That's because, with paramedics lacking training, a nurse is often required to travel with a seriously ill patient who is transferred to a city hospital.

Where ambulances are stationed is another issue Morrison hopes the review will consider.

In Metro, where paramedics have advanced life saving training, there are 8.4 ambulances for every 100,000 residents, compared to 3.4 for every 100,000 in York.

But, she says, it's not always a matter of adding cars, but more strategically placed crews.

"It's been proven to not be dependent on how many ambulances we have, but where they are located when the calls come in," she said, pointing out that Richmond Hill, Thornhill and Markham are the busiest areas. "We have more fire trucks than ambulances, so the response time for them is greater. Maybe it would be good to have an ambulance in a fire station."

Morrison would also like to see CPR taught to more citizens — a procedure that can bridge the gap in those crucial minutes before help arrives.

Public consultations will occur with the project manager of the ambulance service review during the late fall, with a report due by Dec. 1.

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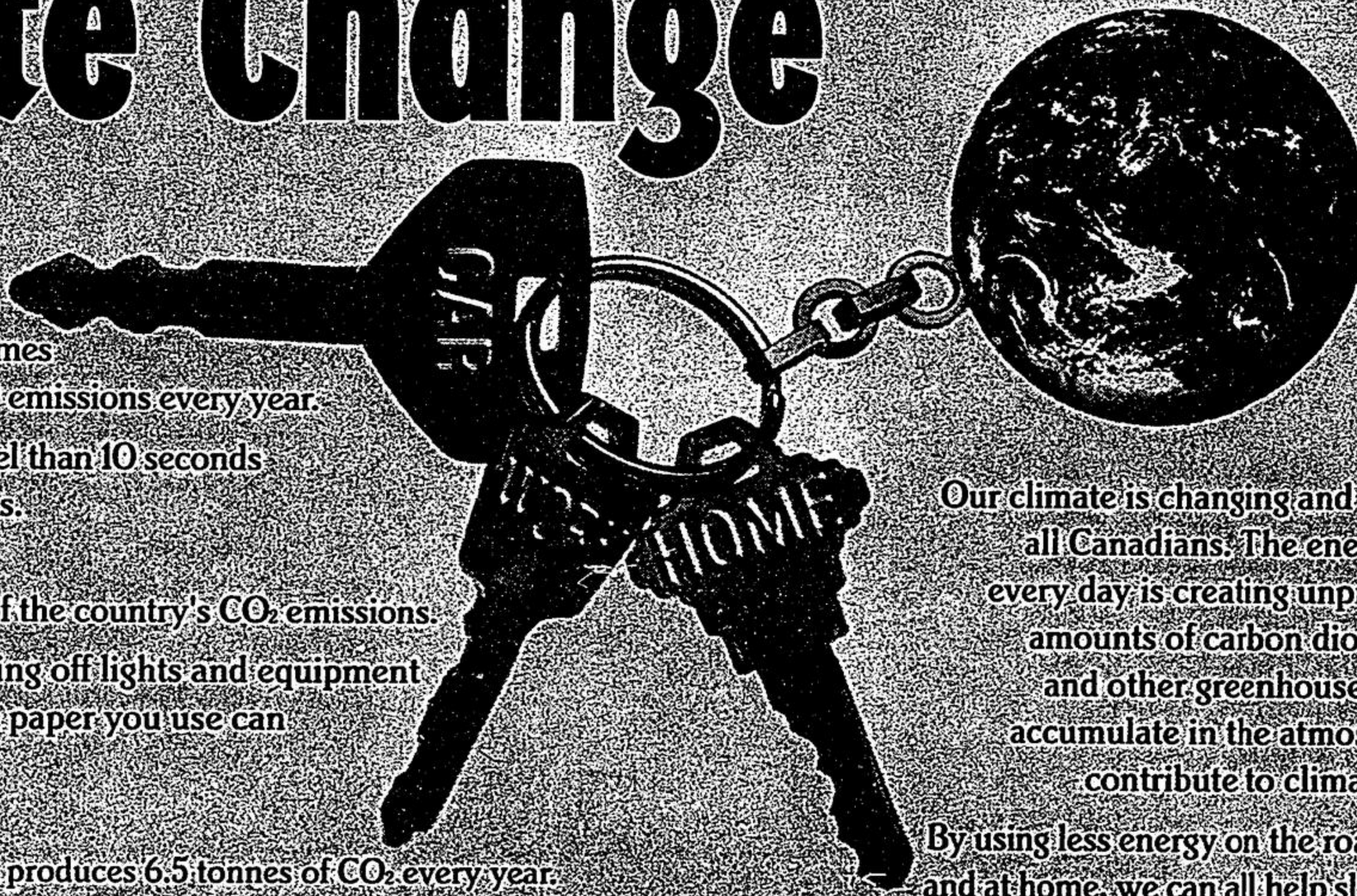
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