

Economist & Sun
Stouffville Tribune

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HEALTH: A dozen Markham-Stouffville Hospital doctors take shot at opening whole-health clinic

Magna health-care agency nixed

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Magna International employees won't be enjoying the benefits of their own health-care agency, but the province's rejection of their proposal hasn't discouraged a group of Markham doctors from pursuing a similar idea.

The Aurora-based auto parts firm learned recently the province decided to nix its proposal to run its own comprehensive health-care organization funded by the province but managed by employees and physicians.

The news didn't come as a surprise to officials at the auto parts plant, but the physician in charge says the government gave up on an ideal proposal.

"We anticipated the ministry would not want to be moving ahead with any

new projects almost a year and a half ago," said Dr. Arif Bhimji, Magna's vice-president of health care development.

"Whether that will change in the future, I'm not sure."

Several private practices are already piloting integrated health systems in Ontario, but the province appeared disinterested in testing the idea with a private company. Currently there are a number of pilot projects approved in Chatham, Kingston, Paris and Wawa.

Bhimji said it was clear for some time that the province was tied up with health-care reform in other key areas and didn't have time to look at new proposals.

"I think the reason the government put Magna's proposal on the back burner is they are expending a lot of energy around hospital restructuring

and community service delivery, trying to get efficiencies out of the system," he said.

But the ruling against Magna hasn't stopped a group of 12 doctors at Markham-Stouffville Hospital from considering making a similar application to offer a variety of services under one roof to a specific group of patients.

"The idea is to have a group of providers — not just physicians, but nutritionists and others — working to provide the bulk of care to a group of patients," explained Dr. Jim Maclean, chief of staff at Markham-Stouffville Hospital. "The group is funded not by fee-for-service, but as a group, and I think you end up with a better product. It's a better way of care because the system is designed to keep people healthy, as opposed to treating a disease."

Maclean believes it is the future of health care and, four years ago, so did Magna founder Frank Stronach.

In 1993, Magna devised its proposal for the organization, offering acute hospital care, home care, long-term care, workplace preventive health programs, chiropractic and dental services, after-hours house calls, well-baby programs and early childhood



JIM MACLEAN

Providers aim to cater to host of health-care issues

intervention. The company would obtain money from the province and oversee spending locally.

And when Stronach approached the Ontario government with his idea for a comprehensive health organization in April 1994, the deputy minister of health gave Magna \$250,000 to conduct a feasibility study. The company was the only private firm to apply for funding and would later spend \$800,000 of its own money developing the plan.

At the time, Magna was paying almost \$7 million every year in employer health tax and the firm wanted to have some influence over how health care was offered.

Magna had hoped its facility would be running by early 1996.

But after four years of proposals and waiting, Magna pushed the ministry to render a decision.

"We sort of forced their hand. They were willing to sit on it a little longer but we needed some response. We have numerous resources tied up waiting for the external program to take place," said Bhimji.

Magna was confident it could make the pilot project work, Bhimji said, serving not only their employees, but people living in nearby communities.

With York Region's booming population, Bhimji says, the demand for medical services will only continue.

"We're going to have to have more services, so it is difficult to understand why the ministry wouldn't want to expand," he said.

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CLARIFICATION

A phone number printed in Tuesday's paper is causing confusion among residents wanting to renew or replace their lost health cards.

The Ontario Ministry of Health will be at Markham-Stouffville Hospital today and tomorrow, as well as on Sept. 16 and 30.

To book an appointment, call 1-905-434-3724. This is a long distance call to Oshawa, and the Ministry of Health will accept collect calls, take the caller's name, and return their call.

Before you go, make sure you have all the documents you need. For a detailed list of acceptable documents, call the Automated Information System at 1-800-664-8988.

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