

Paramedics fear privatization

Regional ambulance services wary of consultant's report

BY DAWN LIERSCH
STAFF WRITER

Local paramedics are terrified that York Region may privatize ambulance service, insisting patient care will suffer if that happens.

Privatization is one of five options being considered by York councillors now that ambulance service has been downloaded from the province to the regions.

But Lorne Cowx, a York County Hospital paramedic, warned handing the service over to private companies could jeopardize patient care.

"They're responsible to the stakeholders... What kind of service are they going to deliver if they're trying to make a profit?", he said. "Paramedics are terrified of what they might do."

"Profit shouldn't be made off a person's misfortune. I believe any profit that's made should be put into improving the service."

The region has hired a consulting firm to investigate the best way to provide ambulance services in York. A report is expected in February.

About 100 people turned out for a public meeting hosted by

the consultants in Newmarket last week, including doctors, paramedics and firefighters.

Although he is against privatization, Cowx said downloading ambulance service to the regions could result in dramatic improvements to the quality of service. "York Region could end up being the new benchmark for ambulance service," he said. "We know some changes are needed."

York paramedics have been requesting more money be sunk into the service for additional vehicles, staff and training.

Advanced life support training would allow paramedics to administer life-saving medications, start an intravenous line and insert a breathing tube into an airway to help patients having difficulty breathing — all things they aren't allowed to do now.

Meridith Morrison, manager of the region's base hospital program, agrees patient care is the bottom line for any new service.

She, too, wants all paramedics trained in advanced life support, as well as training firefighters to use defibrillators to improve the survival rate for

local heart attack victims.

Morrison also wants one central dispatch system for the region.

Paul Cooke, a representative for York Region's firefighters, said he wouldn't mind a regional ambulance system similar to Toronto's, or an integrated fire and ambulance service.

"But, if there's any kind of marriage of fire and ambulance services, we want it to be a happy marriage. We don't want to dominate it," he said, adding integrating the services will take a long time because firefighters will need more medical training.

Currently, firefighters assist paramedics through a tiered response system and can provide cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and, sometimes, defibrillation.

"We don't want their jobs. (Paramedics) are trained to do their job and they're respected. There's no fear of us engulfing them," Cooke said.

He is also against privatization of ambulance services, fearing profit-making will be more important than providing quality service.

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