

Hospitals compete for piece of provincial funding pie

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test used to determine where heart disease is occurring. Together with the cath lab, the other aspects of the cardiac centre will boost the hospital's staff by at least 50 people and require a \$15-million injection of capital funding to create the appropriate facilities.

The designation of the cardiac centre ended the year on a bright note for health care in the region — a year plagued by underfunding and overcrowded facilities, a result of coping with a booming population. In late June, York Region hospitals cashed in on the provincial govern-

ment's largest reinvestment announcement in Ontario's health-care system. It was good news for residents and local hospital officials, who feared the possibility of bed closures and service cuts.

York Central in Richmond Hill was granted \$18.9 million to expand its emergency, obstetrical and critical-care departments. York County Hospital in Newmarket gained \$15.8 million for improvement to its emergency and critical-care departments while Markham Stouffville Hospital received \$7.3 million to expand its emergency department.

Announcements of funding for long-term care and other health-related initiatives flowed, but local officials welcomed them with caution, questioning whether the dollars would actually materialize.

At Markham Stouffville, a regional speech and language program to benefit toddlers was launched, almost a decade after programs were severely cut in the region.

At York County, the focus was to become the next cardiac centre in Ontario.

It was a dream hospital president Dan Carriere envisioned four years ago, when the hospital issued its strategic plan naming cardiac care, including diagnostic and surgical services, as a prime area of focus. No one outside the hospital thought they were serious.

"It's not often a strategic plan sees the light of day, let alone see it become reality. I have the feeling a lot of people didn't know how serious we were, but people in this hospital aren't surprised," he said. "The hospital board approved the strategic plan with the knowledge we would be pursuing it aggressively."

And the board gave Carriere the green light to go after the cardiac centre using unusual means — trusting that his was the right approach.

In March, the hospital began performing cardiac pacemaker implants and partnered with General Electric to install a catheterization unit — without

first obtaining approval from the Health Ministry. At the same time, a heart education program and chest pain clinic was up and running.

"When we got into this we acknowledged we were breaking new ground and couldn't afford to fail," he said. "But unfortunately, maybe for all the wrong reasons, people were waiting to point the finger. We knew at every turn there were people watching and we could not have room for failure in our strategy."

The medical community watched with curiosity — and even anger — suggesting York County was being too aggressive in its pursuit of the cardiac unit.

It had become the biggest challenge of Carriere's career.

"In January, February and March, there were a lot of people who objected to how we were doing things — that was pretty well the worst time — feeling the whole thing was on your shoulders and the only people supporting it was the board, staff and the patients getting service," recalls Carriere.

A teaching hospital official even told him to his face that his plan would never fly.

"We were rocking the boat — no doubt about it and it was felt right through Metro Toronto and around the province. People wanted to know what we were doing and how."

Carriere said critics, skeptical that a community hospital could provide such a service, must be educated to understand that a better outcome doesn't necessarily come from a bigger facility.

"Can there be excellence in small centres? That's our vision for this hospital," he said.

During an open house York County held for the public in June, hospital board chairperson Tom McPherson acknowledged the vicious debate that had been raging over the cardiac centre.

To show the ministry York County could be the provider of cardiac care, the hospital partnered with General

Electric and installed the \$1.6-million cath lab even though they knew it couldn't be used.

"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 said to Carriere.

Carriere's theory was the more heart services York County could offer, the better chance it had to become the next regional cardiac centre.

Provincial officials halted the pace-maker service after York County had installed the device in nine patients. But late in November, when Carriere was questioning if his gamble had been worth all the risk, he received a personal call from Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer, informing him his hospital would be the next regional cardiac centre.

To observers and the region's other two hospitals, the announcement came as a complete shock.

The location of a cardiac centre was under review by the District Health Council — in fact, the steering committee hadn't even had a meeting yet.

In the spring of 1997, Markham Stouffville and York Central had submitted a proposal that outlined a plan for a catheterization lab at Sunnybrook Health Science Centre with service designated for York Region residents.

Both Markham Stouffville and York Central had argued that the centre didn't belong in the northern part of the region.

York County's plan, however, was an aggressive push for a made-in-York Region solution that put a cardiac centre in the Newmarket hospital, which would service residents from as far away as Muskoka.

Carriere says he saw the writing on the wall when the Tories made it clear they supported service close to home and the Markham Stouffville/York Central plan didn't play into that philosophy.

"I believe there's a good possibility we would have had nothing for this region as far as cardiac services go," Carriere said.

The District Health Council had just begun reviewing the options — a process that was to take at least six months, when the announcement came from Witmer.

"I think everybody is scratching their heads over the process. It came out of the blue," said Markham Stouffville Hospital acting president Jim Maclean. "Who made the decision? Obviously, it was a very political decision and I don't think York County would deny that."

HEALTH CARE REVOLUTION

Carriere says Markham residents have always had access to Metro Toronto services and now they have the best of both worlds. For residents of Pefferlaw and Bradford, the service represents a revolution in health care.

"For people at the south end of the region, they now have two choices. Now they can also do what we've been doing for years — travel goes both ways and there's a lot less stress involved in travelling north," he said.

"If physicians want to continue referring patients to Sunnybrook and St. Mike's, that will continue. But what this boils down to is there's a regional program in the province of Ontario and you enter it and it determines where you access service. I would hope a physician would do the responsible thing and let their patient go where a space is available. When you have a heart problem, time is of the essence."

Patients may also need to be convinced about where they receive care, says Richmond Hill cardiologist Dr. Eric Gangbar.

"Most patients in the southwest tend to gravitate to the Toronto area. It makes much more sense for them to go to a regional centre at our hospital or Sunnybrook, rather than to York County," said Gangbar.

"If you drive north from Finch or Sheppard, you naturally flow into Richmond Hill."

Despite the criticism over the process, no one can deny the benefit such a designation will bring the community.

But questions remain — what will the budget be and will it be enough?

When York Central took on the regional dialysis program, it created an influx of patients with other disease implications requiring care in areas such as medicine and surgery — it also created a \$1.5-million deficit the hospital was still looking for relief from in late December.

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