

**EMERGENCY HEALTH CARE:** Resident discovers huge inequities in York Region's services

# All matter of money, ambulance worker says

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
STAFF WRITER

When Fern Scianitti made the decision to bring her chronically ill father home to live with her in Thornhill, she thought she had made the right choice.

The 64-year-old man, who suffers from congestive heart failure had been living in his Toronto home, but Scianitti felt she could provide more consistent care herself, combined with Home Care.

But when her father needed emergency care late last month, Scianitti suddenly discovered there are huge inequities in the level of care paramedics can provide in York Region, compared to Toronto and other areas.

Suffering in extreme pain, her father desperately needed a shot of morphine — something he had received in past directly from paramedics in Toronto.

"I called the hospital first and they said it would probably be a three-hour waiting period," Scianitti said. "So I called 911. But they didn't tell me the paramedics couldn't do anything... but when they got here, they said they can't administer drugs or IVs."

"They had done it in Toronto but now I understand the paramedics there are level three, but in York Region, they are only level one."

The paramedics ended up taking Scianitti's father to North York General, where the hospital was able to provide relief.

"I'm devastated about this," she said. "You have a parent who is chronically ill and was in his own home, and I transferred him here assuming we had all the services we had in Toronto."

Paramedic Lorne Cowx knows all too well the concerns of people like Scianitti.

"If you have a major heart attack on the north side of Steeles, you'll get a level one paramedic, but if you walk to the south side, you'll get level three," said Cowx. "It's all a matter of money."

Ironically, the provincial government's plan to pool health and social service costs across the GTA will force York Region to contribute \$4 million to help pay for Toronto's ambulance service.

York's ambulance workers can only administer five drugs in the field — compared to 15 in areas with advanced service. And they can't insert the breathing tube or inject the intravenous drugs an unconscious cardiac-arrest victim needs.

The experience with her father has prompted Scianitti to circulate a petition, pleading with officials to extend training to York Region's paramedics.

"They aren't able to put an IV in if he needs Heparin (a blood thinner) or other drugs. Many times, he is in congestive heart failure and he needs morphine for pain," Scianitti said. "They can give him oxygen and nitro — both things I have for him. I'm better off putting him in the car and driving up to the hospital."

Petitions demanding better service in York aren't new, but with the region in the middle of reviewing ambulance services, Scianitti's plea may help influence councillors.

In the fall of 1997, Dr. Larry Bacher pleaded with regional councillors to provide advanced lifesaving training to paramedics so they could improve their chances of saving critical patients.

Bacher watched his 44-year-old neighbour die of cardiac arrest on the side of the road because York Region's paramedics couldn't perform advanced lifesaving techniques

and social services across the GTA. Backed by Vaughan Councillor Bernie Green, another doctor and a dozen paramedics, Bacher presented a 5,000-name petition from residents demanding better service.

At the time, officials suggested they couldn't afford to beef up service because they were being hit by provincial downloading and pooling health

and social services across the GTA.

But during public consultation sessions held recently, ambulance officials said a strong case has been made for increasing training.

"It's looking very positive that advanced life support (ALS) will come to York Region," said Meridith Morrison, program manager for York

Region's base hospital in Markham.

ALS will include life-saving drugs and intubation (insertion of a tube into the larynx), as well as advanced cardiac life support. Cowx said paramedics want the training, but they will also want extra financial compensation for having and using those skills.

— with files from Lisa Queen



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