



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Dale Smith, co-ordinator of emergency medicine at York Central Hospital, says she's facing the worst hospital crunch in her 30 years of nursing.

Flu bug takes big bite

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"In the elderly and those prone to pneumonia, it can be dangerous because you can get a secondary bacterial infection. It can start with the flu and develop into pneumonia," said Volkening.

York hospitals are admitting nursing home patients from outside the region because Toronto hospital emergency rooms have been so jammed with sick people.

This flu bug is really knocking the bejeebers out of people.

"We had a gentleman from a nursing home at Bathurst and Eglinton," said York Region Ambulance paramedic Lorne Cowx.

"This flu bug is really knocking the bejeebers out of people — people are passing out and that's a bad flu. One of our ambulance guys, working on a shift just before Christmas, passed out from it."

Health officials suggest a flu vaccination is still the best defence — available from family doctors for about \$15.

Anyone over 65 or deemed to be at risk due to chronic illness can receive the shot for free.

"It's not too late, it could last until April or May," said Volkening.

"It may not protect you 100 per cent, but you may not end up being bed-ridden with it for as long."

Health-care workers are providing the flu shot free of charge but, for some, extensive exposure to the sick has destroyed any immunity they may have had. That makes it hard to find nurses and support staff to call in when hospitals are busy.

"It can be very harmful to your health, a lot of our staff are sick," said Dale Smith, co-ordinator of emergency medicine at York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill.

And it may be some time before there is any relief from the winter bug. Doctors suggest it could hang around until March.

No end in sight for crisis

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They're out there trying to find a home for their patient."

York Central has been on critical care bypass more often than any other time in its history. In fact, the hospital was only on CCB for a total of 10-1/2 hours all last year — but surpassed that mark in a single day earlier this week.

"Staff are very burnt out from working overtime and extra shifts. I don't even remember the last time I sat down for a meal," said Smith. "And the worst part is it's not going away for a while."

And York Central isn't alone.

At York County Hospital in Newmarket, there were as many people waiting in the emergency room yesterday as there were at Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Science Centre. Sunnybrook went on CCB to help cope with the overflow — something York County isn't allowed to do because of its distance from other hospitals.

Earlier this week, Markham Stouffville Hospital was on CCB for two days. On Boxing Day, it was the only hospital taking ambulances in the Toronto area.

"We had our fair share of Toronto ambulances," said Markham Stouffville president Jim Maclean, who said he sympathizes

with paramedics struggling to find a hospital to accept patients.

"It doesn't occur that often in York Region, but I think it's very tough for a paramedic when the closest hospital is on CCB and they have to go farther away," he said.

Maclean suggested the current crisis can be linked to a number of factors, including the timing of Christmas and New Year's this year — both falling on weekends when walk-in clinics and doctors' offices are often closed.

'I've never seen it this bad.'

Lorne Cowx
Paramedic

The peak flu season, combined with an aging and growing population, doesn't help either, he said.

The backlog gets worse when patients have to wait for lab tests and X-rays. And backlogs create a trickle-down effect that can affect people waiting for an ambulance.

York Region paramedic Lorne Cowx explained when an ambulance has to go farther to find an open ER ward, it puts their coverage area in jeopardy because it leaves it unattended longer.

"That critical time you need isn't there," he said. "I've never seen it

this bad.

"The guys are holding up, but we have no control over the matter. We're frustrated for the patients and for the guys in emergency."

With so many Toronto hospitals on CCB, York hospitals are being swamped with Toronto patients.

On New Year's Day, York County saw 270 people in its emergency room, compared to the norm of 140 patients a day.

"It was a very busy night — everybody was sick," said Dr. Robert Doherty, the hospital's chief of emergency.

He said one of the most tragic cases involved a 75-year-old woman from Perth, here visiting family, who suffered respiratory arrest and had to be intubated. But there was no intensive care bed available at the hospital, or anywhere else in the GTA, so she was transferred to Kingston.

"It's an awful thing to tell a family their loved one is going to Kingston, and not even Toronto," Doherty said.

He added there are even some patients being redirected to hospitals that aren't equipped to treat their illness.

"We're seeing some patients who need treatment like dialysis (a procedure York County can't provide)," Doherty said. "We had a patient

arrive who lives across the street from York Central (which does have a dialysis centre). So we have to assess them and get them to a place that does do dialysis."

The flu bug has hit the elderly particularly hard and, in some cases, is developing into pneumonia.

"They need oxygen and it's not just a matter of giving them medication and sending them home," Doherty said.

Maclean blamed the current ER crunch on a combination of population growth, hospital downsizing and an insufficient number of new long-term care facilities.

"We've downsized the acute care system too small, so there are fewer care beds. And if there are no new long-term care beds, we can't transfer those people out of hospital," he said.

And while the flu season is expected to continue until at least March, Maclean said several looming issues mean the backlogs will remain for other reasons.

Nurses and doctors are in high demand, making it difficult to increase staff to serve the extra beds needed.

And the staffing shortages could get worse, with all three York Region hospitals on the verge of building expansions and seeking new staff.

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