

Witmer raises the nursing bar



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Ontario Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer received a standing ovation from nurses at the annual general meeting of the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario in Richmond Hill Thursday.

Nurses cheer new educational standards for their profession

BY JENNIFER BROWN
Staff Writer

It's a reception Elizabeth Witmer doesn't usually receive from front-line health-care providers.

But the Minister for Health and Long Term Care received a standing ovation from registered nurses attending a conference in Richmond Hill Thursday night.

The occasion was the 75th anniversary and annual general meeting of the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO) — the oldest nursing organization in the province.

The warm reception came on the heels of an announcement Witmer made the day before, requiring that a bachelor's degree in nursing be the standard for all new registered nurses, beginning Jan. 1, 2005.

The degree designation is one registered nurses have been demanding for decades.

"We value the skill and knowledge of Ontario nurses and we will make sure Ontario nurses become part of the changes coming in health care, including primary care," Witmer told the group of about 300 nurses Thursday night. "We are very aware it is your skill and commitment that ensures the well-being of hospitals and long-term care centres."

Nursing officials say the degree

will ensure nurses are better prepared to care for the acutely ill patients they encounter in both hospital and community settings.

"I believe it is a significant change that reflects the importance of self-regulation in the nursing profession," Witmer said.

Right now, nursing students graduate from a mix of academic programs offered in the province, ranging from four-year university programs to college programs and some post-secondary courses offered at local high schools.

Nursing programs at community colleges and universities will soon be linked to provide the degree-granting programs to students.

The change will not affect nurses currently working in the profession.

Nursing officials say the changes, which also come with additional funding to support the increased educational components required, will also assist in addressing the shortage of nurses in Canada. It is projected there will be a shortage of 150,000 nurses in the country by 2005, if measures are not taken now to address the problem.

Shortages began soon after cuts to health care in the province caused many hospitals to lay off nurses, forcing many to either leave the profession or seek work out of province.

On average, slightly more than 500 RNs graduate from programs each year but, by 2005, that number could reach 2,000, with the changes announced this week.

Witmer also announced that there are 226 nurse practitioners throughout the province "with many more to come."

"We will continue to move forward with primary care and make sure nurse practitioners become full members of that primary care team," she said.

Nurse practitioners have been working in Canada since the late '70s, when the first physician shortage occurred, but new legislation passed this year widens their scope of practice to include prescribing drugs and ordering X-rays and lab tests. The advanced-practice NPs are being encouraged to work in rural and remote communities where it is difficult to attract doctors.

But while Witmer was popular with nurses Thursday night, she was not the only politician in the room to receive positive feedback from the nurses.

"There is a continued shortage of nurses out there and nurses are being worked too hard and too long and under too much pressure which is causing many of your colleagues to leave the profession," said provincial NDP leader Howard

Hampton.

Hampton also took aim at the continued lack of funding for full-time nursing positions.

"Nursing can't continue to be recognized as a part-time, temporary or on-call skill. Minister, we will hold you accountable on that one as well."

Nurses say the province will also be challenged to address the wage difference that currently exists between nurses who work in hospitals and their peers in the community care sector.

In her address to the nurses, Ontario Lt. Gov. Hilary Weston spoke about the importance of community nursing, as foreseen by Florence Nightingale 150 years ago as "the destiny of all nursing is nursing of the sick in their homes."

But community nurses earn, on average, 15 per cent less than their peers working in hospitals.

Witmer says a joint task force looking at the issue has recommended additional resources be directed to the wage problem, but a resolution is still a long way away.

And health critic Lyn McLeod agrees the solution is not an easy one.

"I think we are a long way away from a single salary for nursing, but we need a consistent standard for community nursing with standard working conditions," she said.

REGIONAL News Digest



WHAT'S HAPPENING

Indiglobe Earth Day 2000
Sunday, April 16, 2 p.m.
Indigo, Yonge St. and Hwy. 7
Richmond Hill

Kortright Centre for Conservation supervisor Allan Foster (above) and his friends Cailin Walsh, 2, and Billy Lem, 2, enjoy a nature story in preparation for all kinds of demonstrations celebrating Earth Day.

Pellet gun prompts charge

An 18-year-old Sacred Heart Catholic School student faces charges after a pellet gun was found in the back seat of his car at school.

As he left his car for class, a staff member saw what appeared to be a handgun lying on the floor and called police.

Officers seized a Cross 357-177 pellet gun and charged the youth with careless use of a firearm.

Man struck with tire iron

A 23-year-old Markham man is charged with assault causing bodily harm after a man was hit on the head 15 times with a tire iron. Police believe the attack was prompted by jealousy over a woman.

The gruesome assault happened Wednesday just before 11 p.m. in the Yongesview Avenue driveway of the woman.

The victim drove up intending to visit his girlfriend and noticed a vehicle parked in the road. A man he'd never seen before opened his car door, asked his name and before the victim could respond, began smashing the tire iron over his head and face.

He suffered serious trauma to his right eye, teeth, nose and the back of his head.

The accused was arrested at 6 a.m. the following day.

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