

Province's emergency room funding doesn't solve staffing woes, region's hospitals say

'It's not a magic bullet'

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

The province's \$63.3 million for hospital beds geared to stave off another winter of emergency room frenzy will be of little use if hospitals don't have the staff.

"There has to be some caution on all of this stuff," said Dr. Jim MacLean, president of Markham Stouffville Hospital, of Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer's announcement Wednesday of emergency room funding for Ontario hospitals.

"There are some significant human resources challenges ... I'm not so sure we can all achieve the targets."

The announcement includes funding for 10 transitional acute care beds for Markham Stouffville Hospital, which will fill it to capacity until it can redevelop.

753 NEW BEDS IN GTA

York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill will receive funding for 10 transitional beds and 10 "flex beds" to be used for four months during peak periods of ER demand, such as flu season.

York County Hospital in Newmarket will receive funding for 20 transitional beds and six flex beds.

Overall, the province will spend \$46.5 million for 753 new hospital beds in the Greater Toronto Area. It will also kick in \$16.8 million for 450 flex beds to cover peak demands.

Although the province's emergency room strategy also includes plans to assist hospitals in recruiting and retaining new staff, MacLean says plans take time to implement.

And Brenda Ingledew, emergency medicine director at York Central Hospital, worries it will be difficult to find nurses to operate flex beds on a temporary basis.

WHAT YORK REGION HOSPITALS GET

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"Nurses are at a premium right now. It will be difficult to find someone to work four months a year," she said.

York hospitals have tried to get a jump start on recruiting staff by partnering with Seneca College to train nurses for critical care services. Nurses coming out of the fall program should be available for work in York hospitals around Christmas.

"York hospitals played a significant role in showing the ministry the need for more beds," MacLean said. "There are times when we notice significant pressures."

Although Markham Stouffville Hospital did not have to turn ambulances away as much as other hospitals last winter when flu outbreaks created emergency room overload, MacLean said staff had to handle additional patients coming from busy Toronto hospitals.

However, York Central Hospital went on redirect and critical care bypass last winter more than any other year, said Melina Cormier, the hospital's public affairs director. Ironically, on the day of the announcement, the hospital was on consideration for redirect.

Cormier said the new beds, combined with a provincial plan to offer free flu vaccines to all citizens this year, should help ease pressure on the hospital's emergency department.

"It's not a magic bullet. It's not a solution overnight — but it should help," she said. "The crunch in emergency departments is usually caused by lack of beds."

But Ingledew is concerned hospitals are still ill-equipped for the anticipated crunch. She recalls a nightmare winter last year when York Central was frequently filled to capacity, creating ER backups.

She blames the increased volumes on growth and the fact that overloaded Toronto hospitals —

struggling to fill gaps in service caused by emergency room closures — were sending their patients north.

York Central's emergency room was originally built to handle 25,000 to 30,000 cases annually but handled more than 60,000 last year, she said.

"This year, it's expected to be even higher," she said, adding the hospital could probably use an additional 20 beds to accommodate growing community needs.

"It's really not enough, but it's a step in the right direction ... It's important that the ministry has eased our plight somewhat."

UNIQUE PREDICAMENT

York County Hospital faces a unique predicament. Because it is not located near other large hospitals, it often has to open unbudgeted overflow beds to avoid going on redirect, said hospital president Dan Carriere.

"We didn't go on redirect as much as other hospitals. We try not to do that ... We are forced to deal with it another way," he said.

Carriere said he is particularly pleased with the announcement because he had projected the hospital would need exactly 20 new beds this year.

He suggested York County's status as the eighth most efficient hospital in a peer group of more than 100 Ontario hospitals may have prompted the province to address its needs.

"We're not asking the province to fund an inefficient operation," he said. "I'm confident the government will address our needs because we've got our house in order."

Although he doesn't yet know how much money the hospital will receive to operate the beds, he stressed the funding should help to reduce the hospital's \$12-million deficit.

REGIONAL News Digest



WHAT'S HAPPENING

Binder Twine Festival
Saturday, Sept. 9,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Islington Avenue, Kleinburg

Reigning Binder Twine Festival Queen Gail Schultz is all set to crown one of the lucky contestants in the annual old-fashioned festival, which promises contests, games and entertainment for the family.

Man charged in assault

A 73-year-old Thornhill man is charged after an 11-year-old girl was sexually assaulted in a Thornhill park Wednesday.

A heavy-set man sat between the girl and her friend, also 11, as they rested on a park bench at about 3:40 p.m.

He offered them candy, then began to touch one of the girls, police said.

A passer-by noticed what was happening and ordered the girls away. The man then left by the south entrance.

The girls gave a detailed description of the suspect and an arrest was made late Thursday.

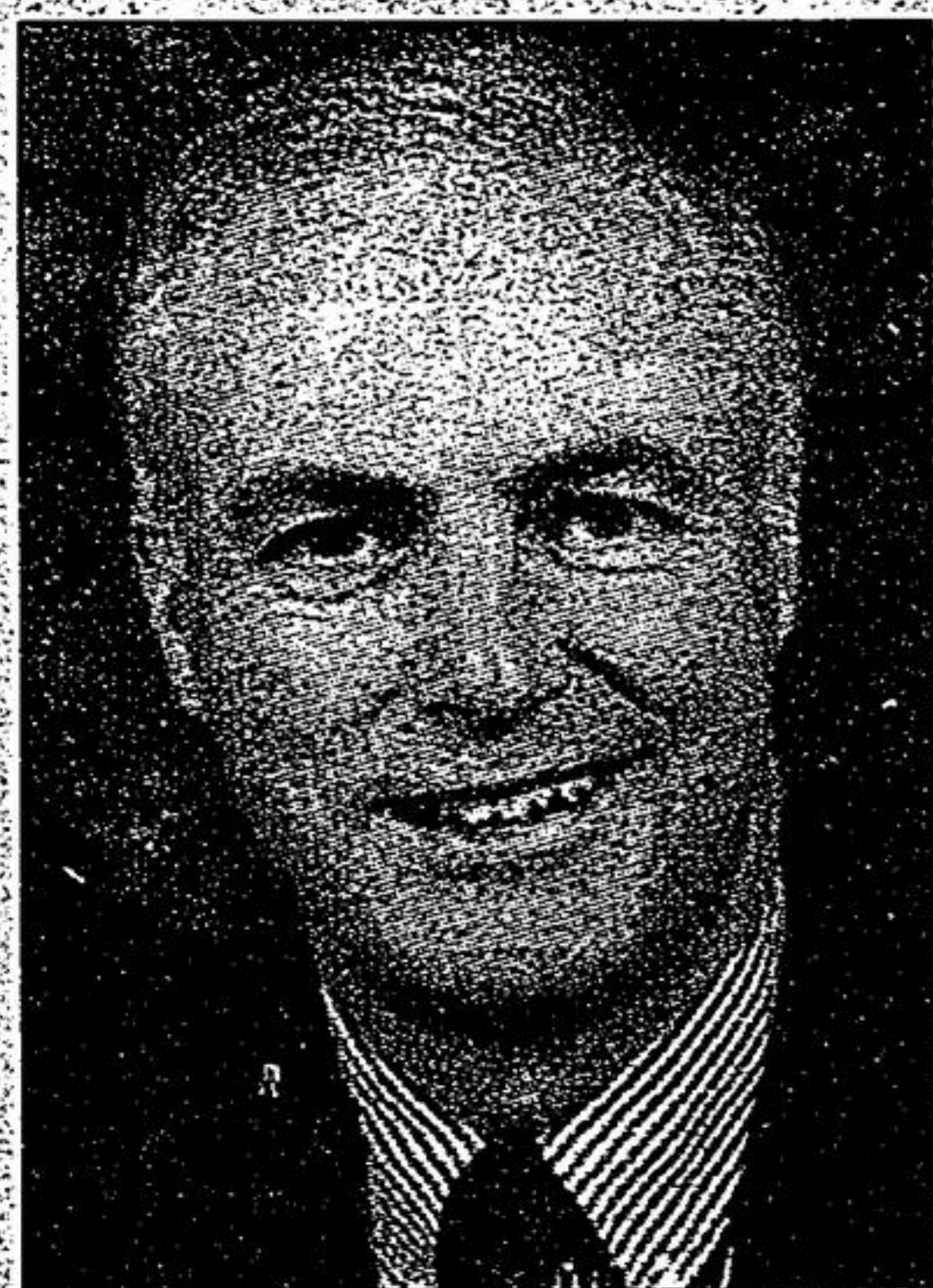
Arrests in missing cash scam

Four former employees of Markham's Computer City are charged after a seven-month scam involving the theft of more than \$12,000.

Police said the missing cash came to light after an internal audit revealed inconsistencies, including thousands of dollars worth of missing merchandise, which had supposedly been returned.

The suspects allegedly entered returns into the computer system, then took the money and split it between them, said Det. Frank Taylor. Auditors could not locate the returned items. Both the audit and the investigation continue.

Three Markham men, 19, 20 and 21 and a 19-year-old Scarborough man are charged with theft over \$5,000 and possession of stolen property.



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— Jim MacLean,

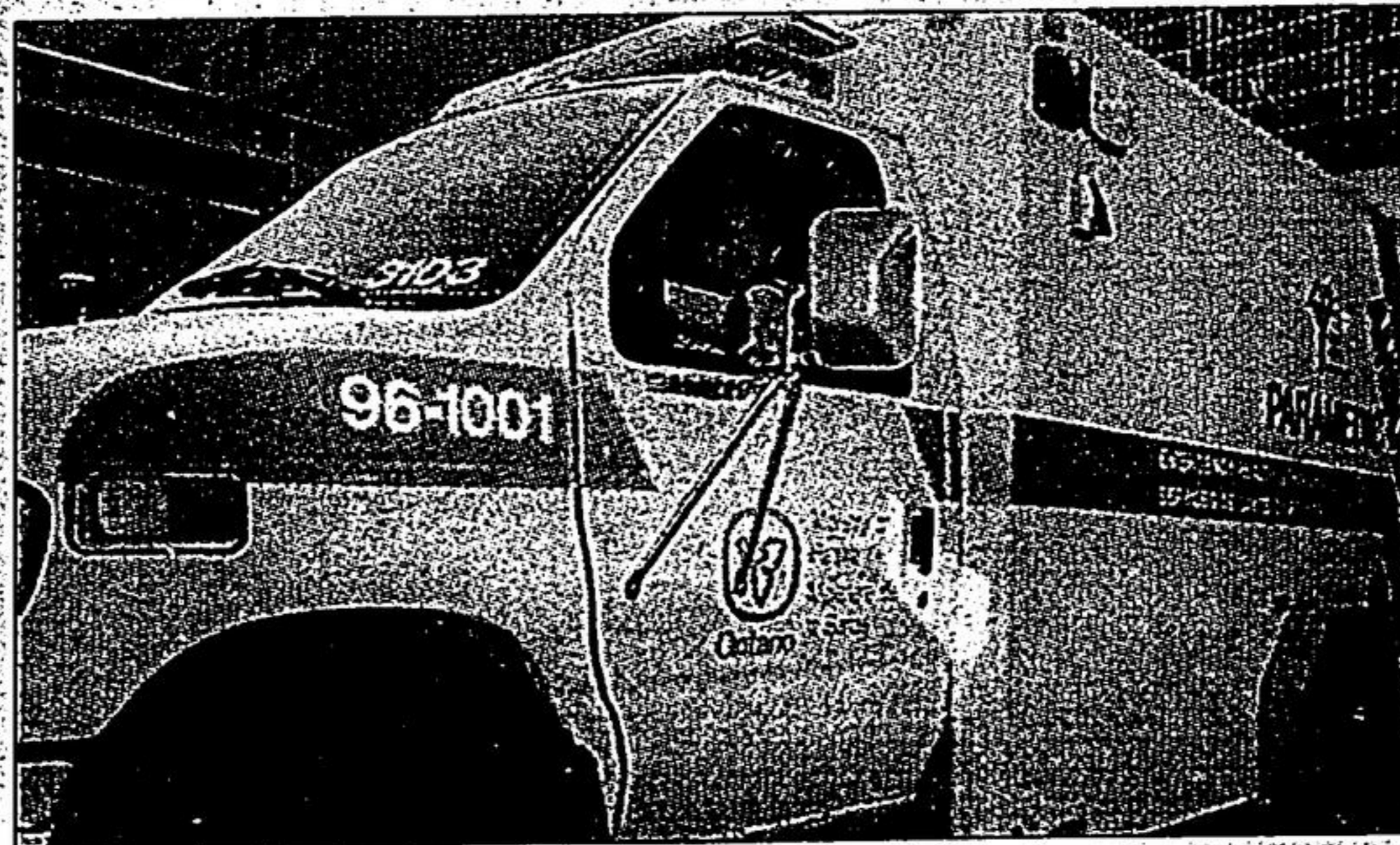
President, Markham Stouffville Hospital



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