

Hospitals welcome funding news

Federal cash needed, York officials say

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

News that the federal government will pledge billions of dollars more to health care each year is good medicine for Canada's ailing system, local hospital officials say.

"It's very positive. It reflects the resolve of the provinces and the federal government to come to terms with very pressing issues," said Frank Lussing, president of York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill.

"There is a desperate need for resources so we can continue serving a rapidly growing population."

Under the new health care financing deal sealed on Monday by the premiers and Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Ottawa will top up federal transfer payments to \$18.3 billion next year and will gradually increase transfers to \$21 billion by 2005-2006. That's an increase of about 35 per cent to health and social programs over the next five years.

The federal government

will also invest \$1 billion for new and upgraded medical equipment, with half the money doled out as soon as legislation passes in the House of Commons, with the rest coming in April.

Another \$800 million earmarked for primary care reform will be transferred to the provinces over four years beginning next year while \$500 million will immediately be available for information technology.

Overall, it may allow cash-strapped York Region hospitals to acquire money from the province to increase staff, expand programs and improve equipment.

"We're all struggling in terms of being able to deliver services. I hope this will translate into more funding for us," said Dr. Jim MacLean, president of Markham Stouffville Hospital, pointing out that a rapidly growing and aging population has placed additional demands on York hospitals.

"It's a good example of shared accountability. I think it will set the stage for more shared accountability at the grassroots level as well."

However, the new fund-

ing may not be a cure-all. In fact, Ottawa's share of health-care funding still hasn't even returned to 1994-95 levels after years of cuts.

"A lot of funds have been taken out of health care. Because of inflation, we're not sure how far along we are with this," said Nancy Macken, vice-president of finance and information at York County Hospital in Newmarket, adding hospitals have been forced to reduce beds and look for better ways to deliver service over the years.

"We're really happy there's now recognition of our health care needs through a reinvestment into health care. We're hoping it will relieve cost pressures relating to growth."

Hospital officials stressed

the bulk of funds will go toward hiring more nurses and clinical support staff and improving medical technology.

As part of the deal, the provinces will have to provide a report to the federal government to help measure health-care delivery. Hospital officials say that's not an issue.

"The concept of accountability is great. It already occurs here and this just ensures that across the country things are as uniform as they can be," MacLean said.

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