

# We need political leadership, hospital head says

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

Lack of political leadership has created a crisis in health care by allowing the status quo to block reforms needed to overhaul the system, a York Region symposium on medicare heard last week.

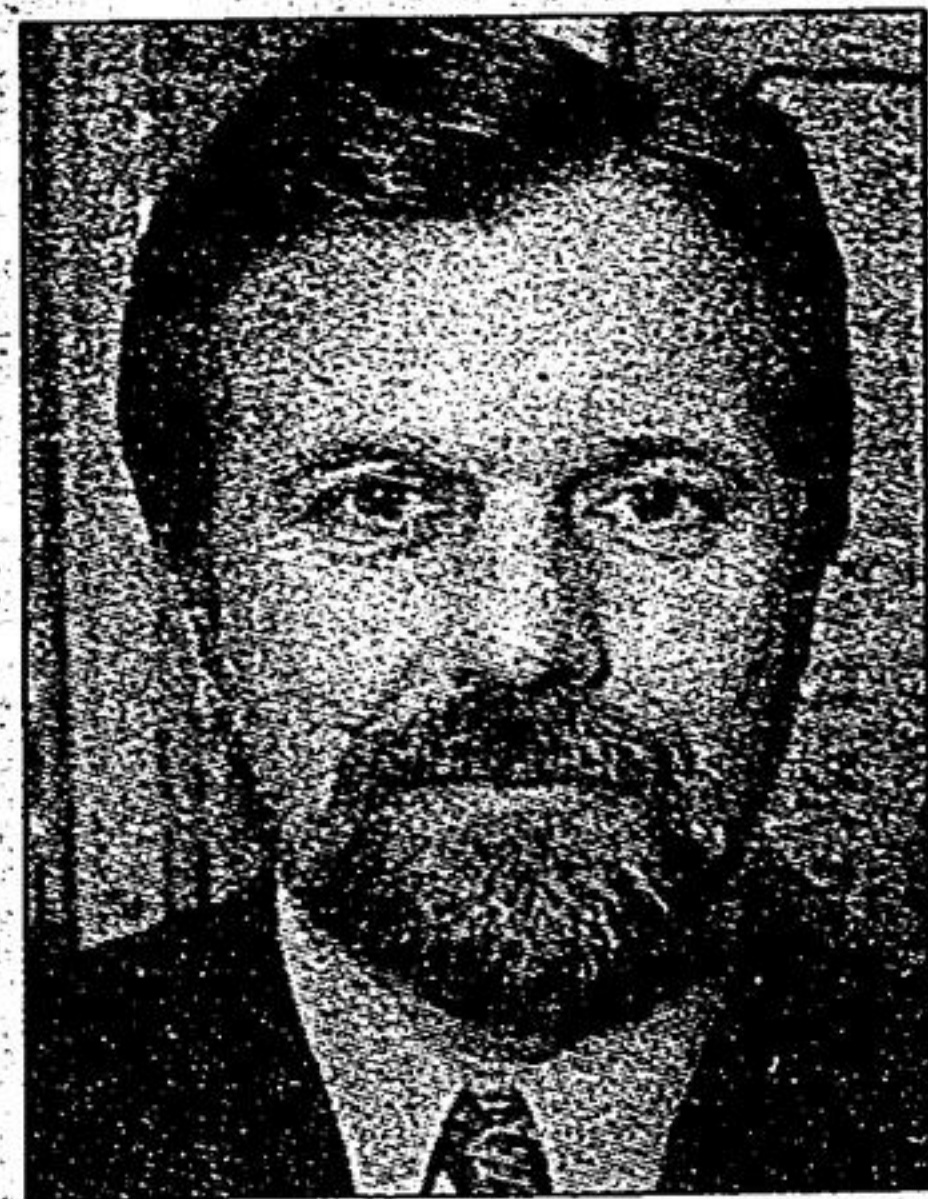
"My sense is we need leadership, pure and simple," Frank Lussing, president of York Central Hospital, told the three dozen people who attended the meeting organized by Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert to gather public opinion for the federal commission on the future of health care.

"We don't want to dance different political tunes every time there is a new government. The system is more important than that. We either need to reaffirm or redesign our vision of health care."

Mr. Lussing said Ontario hospitals need almost \$1 billion in additional funding this year just to maintain existing services. Another \$7 billion in capital funding is required to expand or modernize hospital facilities.

But he acknowledged taxpayers can't continue to keep pace with that demand.

"We can't add \$1 billion year after year after year after year to the hospital system," he said, adding proper leadership would



**FRANK LUSSING:** "We don't want to dance different tunes every time there is a new government."

ensure funding was better spent.

"We probably have enough money in the system right now if we were to spend it right."

Mr. Lussing and two other health care experts — York Central's chief of emergency medicine, Dr. Nalin Ahluwalia, and Shirlee Sharkey, president of Markham-based Saint Elizabeth Health Care Centre and past-president of the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario — described a bleak future for health care without intervention.

Although Canadians continue

to identify health care as their top priority, Mr. Lussing said the system struggles under severe funding pressures, crippling staff shortages and a growing and aging population with increasing expectations for care.

Dr. Ahluwalia said problems visible in emergency departments — long waiting times, ambulances turned away, an inability to admit patients — are the tip of the iceberg of challenges throughout the whole system.

"We have a crisis on our hands."

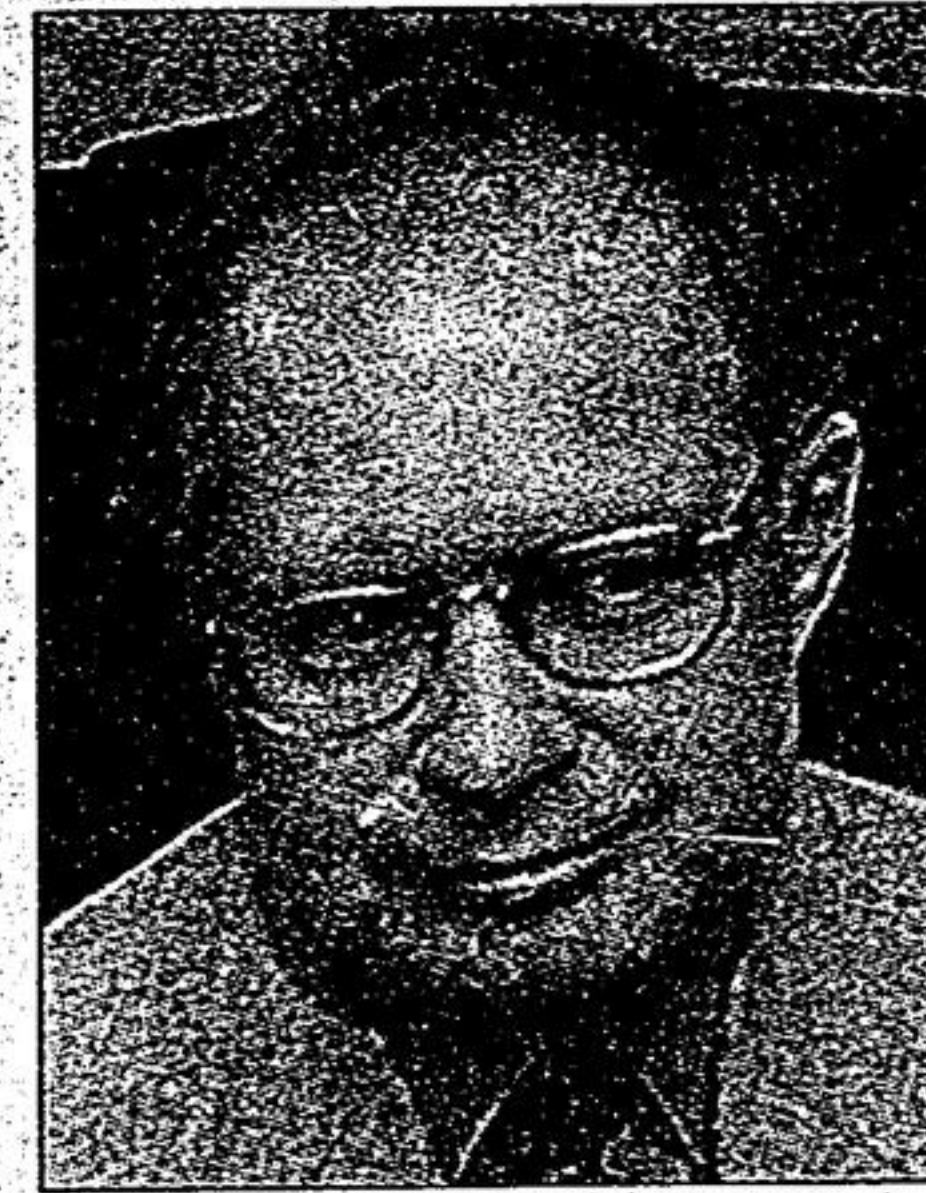
It's increasingly difficult to provide emergency care in high growth communities, Dr. Ahluwalia said, adding severe bed and staff shortages are making an already bad situation worse.

He said he's tired of hearing politicians blame each other or falsely accusing patients of abusing the system.

"Let's stop the blaming and work together," he pleaded.

Ms Sharkey insisted troubles plaguing the health care system will never be resolved until politicians invest enough in community care to allow patients with chronic and terminal illnesses to receive care in their homes.

At the moment, she said, home care across Canada is "a dog's breakfast" because each province



**BRYON WILFERT:** Provincial politicians are misleading public about federal health care funding cuts.

is responsible for the service.

Because community care is not a mandatory service with national standards, many patients fear leaving the hospital, where medical care is guaranteed, for fear they would receive less care at home.

That means acute care beds in hospitals are taken up by patients who would be better served at home, Ms Sharkey said.

She called on Ottawa to pass legislation enacting Canadians' right to home care. The law would mirror the Canada Health Act, setting national standards and

Canadians' rights to access.

Ms Sharkey also called on Ottawa to place a moratorium on further privatization of health care in Canada.

She argued the United States has the highest per-capita medical costs in the world, even though 30 million Americans have no health coverage at all.

Her plea was echoed by Pamela Smith, executive director of Hospice Richmond Hill.

She condemned politicians who put tax cuts above people's needs.

Ms Smith said taxation has provided Canadians with a quality of life that shines above other countries.

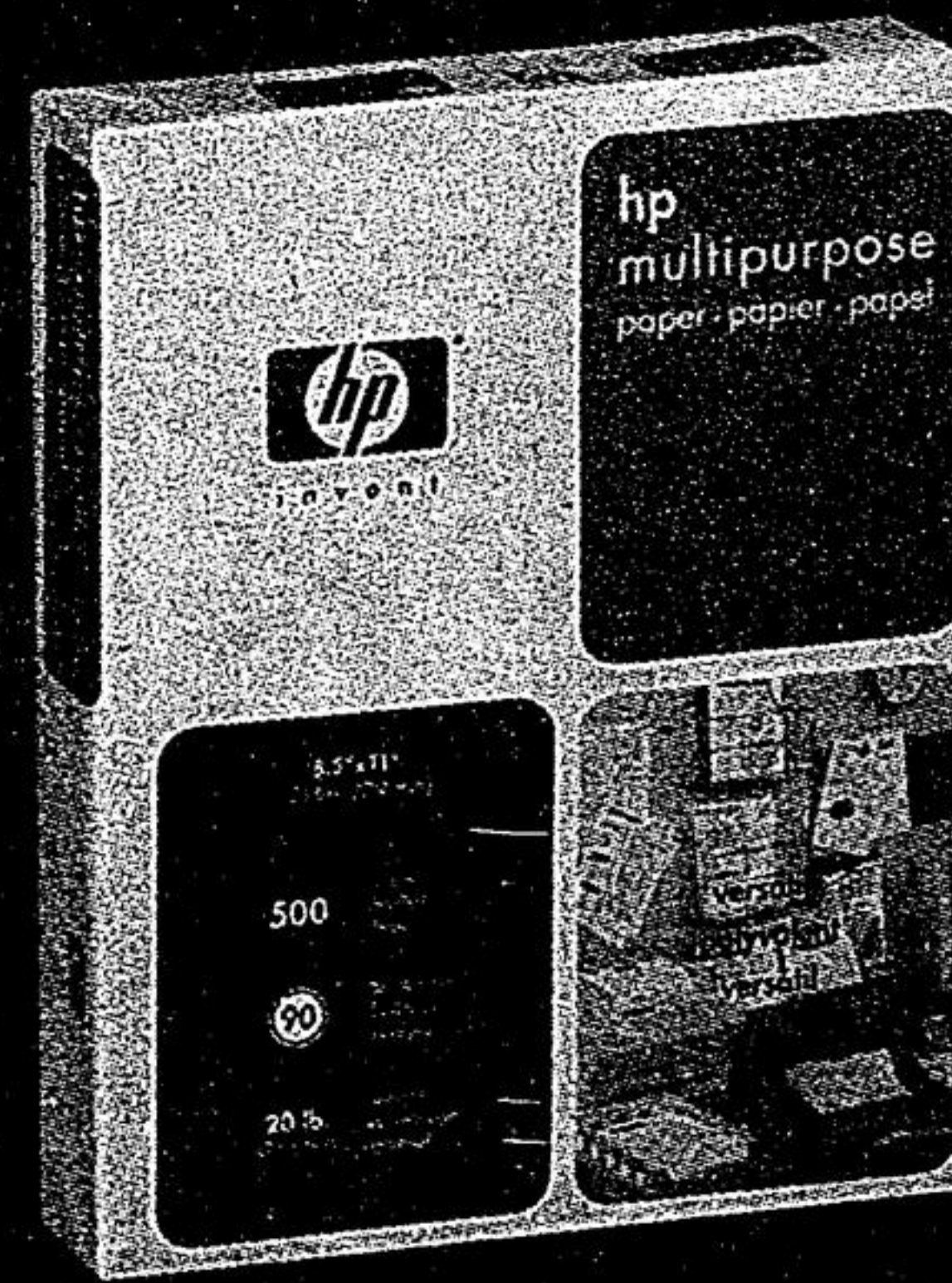
"If you think you're going to get a better system in the U.S., you're wrong."

Meanwhile, Mr. Wilfert, who maintained provincial politicians are misleading the public when they accuse Ottawa of slashing health care funding, said federal Liberals are working to stop mis-spending of government health dollars.

For example, he said his party is working with the provinces to streamline the approval process for prescription drugs by the end of the year.

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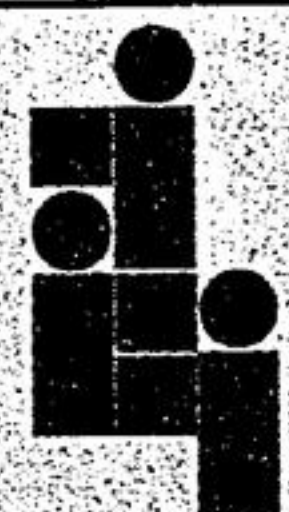
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