

Residents should feel safe using hospital: president

'We have to be vigilant'

Dr. Hanif Kassam, acting medical officer of health

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over. I suspect we will continue to see more cases," Dr. Kassam said yesterday. "Yes, I am concerned. I don't want to raise alarm bells, but I do want to make people aware they should take this seri-

ously." He was responding to the discovery of about 30 members of the Bukas-Loob Sa Diyos Catholic community in Toronto who have probable or suspected cases of SARS. Several members of the congregation are York residents.

About 500 members of the church are now in quarantine.

"Unfortunately, there has been some transmission (of SARS) from what I'm aware in the community," said Dr. Kassam, adding York has had 48 probable cases of SARS, including three deaths and 32 suspected cases. About 350 people remain in quarantine.

"There will likely be further transmission. We have to be vigilant. The public is a stakeholder in all this."

He stressed the need for people to quarantine themselves if necessary and refrain from going out in public if they feel ill from any condition that can be passed on to others.

Dr. Kassam is hoping the police investigation into a Hewlett Packard employee who reported for work despite being directed by public health to stay at home will wrap up next week.

"I'm not the type of person who likes to penalize people. I'm here to protect the health of the public. Whatever charges that are going to be laid are going to be laid by police."

Dr. MacLean stressed residents should feel safe seeking treatment at Markham Stouffville because the entire emergency room has been cleaned and disinfected. Staff have removed everything that is not absolutely necessary to reduce the chance of surface contamination. Staff members have undergone additional training in the protocol for dealing with incoming patients, including gowning, gloving and masking techniques.

"We've gone through everything start to finish," Dr. MacLean said. He added the hospital has also reviewed the number of shifts staff should work in a row, the number of hours per shift and revised patient-to-staff ratio to ensure optimum working conditions for staff."

Dr. MacLean noted his hospital intends to resume day surgeries, diagnostic testing and outpatient procedures as early as next Tuesday, increasing services slowly over the next few weeks.

"We wouldn't put these measures in place unless we felt it was perfectly safe," he said.

The two hospital employees are believed to be the first health care workers to contract the disease after the widespread use of protective gear was made mandatory last month.

Dr. Kassam downplayed the risk to hospital staff.

"I think it is concerning, but at this point in time, it's just these two individuals."

He added his department is continuing its investigation to pinpoint exactly how the staff contracted the disease while using precautions, but admitted the workers may have been so exhausted they made a mistake.

And he assured patients and staff neither worker was exhibiting symptoms while on duty, so it's unlikely they spread the illness to other staff or hospital patients.

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With the closure of two hospitals serving this area, Scarborough Grace and York Central in Richmond Hill, Markham Stouffville has taken the brunt of the overflow, in addition to caring for a high number of SARS patients within the facility.

"It has been very stressful, but I can't say enough about how great the staff has been," Dr. MacLean said.

There are 13 SARS patients at Markham Stouffville, including four staff members, two of whom were infected through the original cluster of cases at Scarborough Grace Hospital.

Three patients remain in intensive care; two are improving but one is "very sick," Dr. MacLean said.

Meanwhile, Ontario's health minister has refused comment on the fact protective measures were not enough to stop the transmission of SARS to the Markham Stouffville staffers.

Tony Clement's press secretary Paul Cantin said, while the minister is "more than aware of how important and how seriously" this new development should be taken, his schedule did not allow time to address the fears of health-care workers and their families.

Despite heightened concerns, Dr. MacLean reminded residents the risk of contracting SARS in the community is still extremely low.

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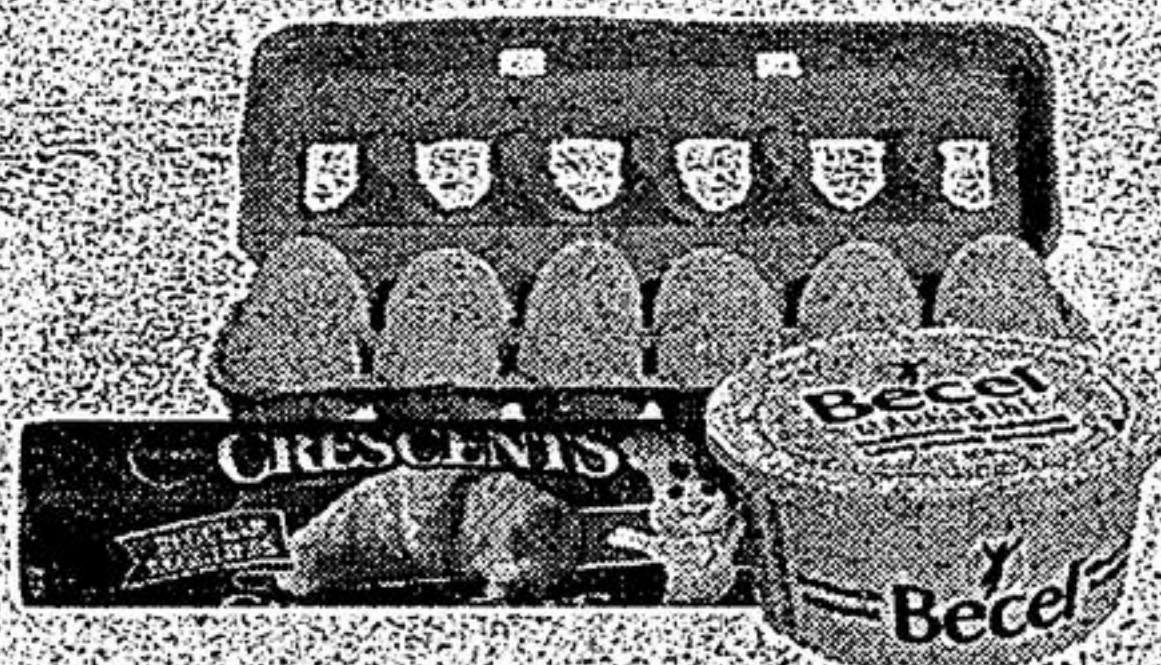


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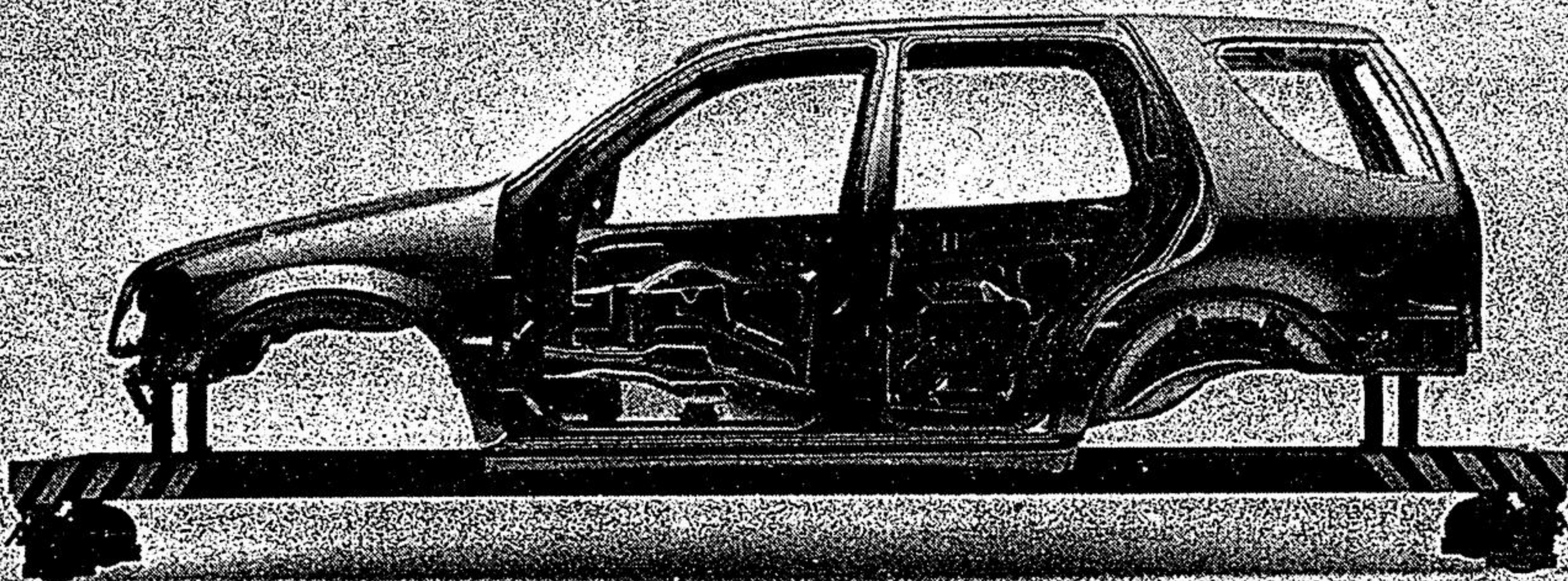
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