

'Situation can only get worse'

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finance a competing clinic. Finger-pointing over the clinic dominated municipal elections last fall and resulted in Mayor Rob Grossi defeating incumbent Jeff Holec.

"It's been a huge issue," said Mr. Grossi, a vocal opponent of the health council's actions.

"At the end of the day, the problem is bringing health care to an underserved community. We've been abandoned (by higher levels of government) when it comes to health care and the issue has landed on our doorstep."

Meanwhile, physicians in Whitchurch-Stouffville are warning of a drastic family doctor shortage.

"With the population expected to expand, the situation can only get worse. There's a definite shortage," said Dr. Donald Petrie, who is not accepting new patients.

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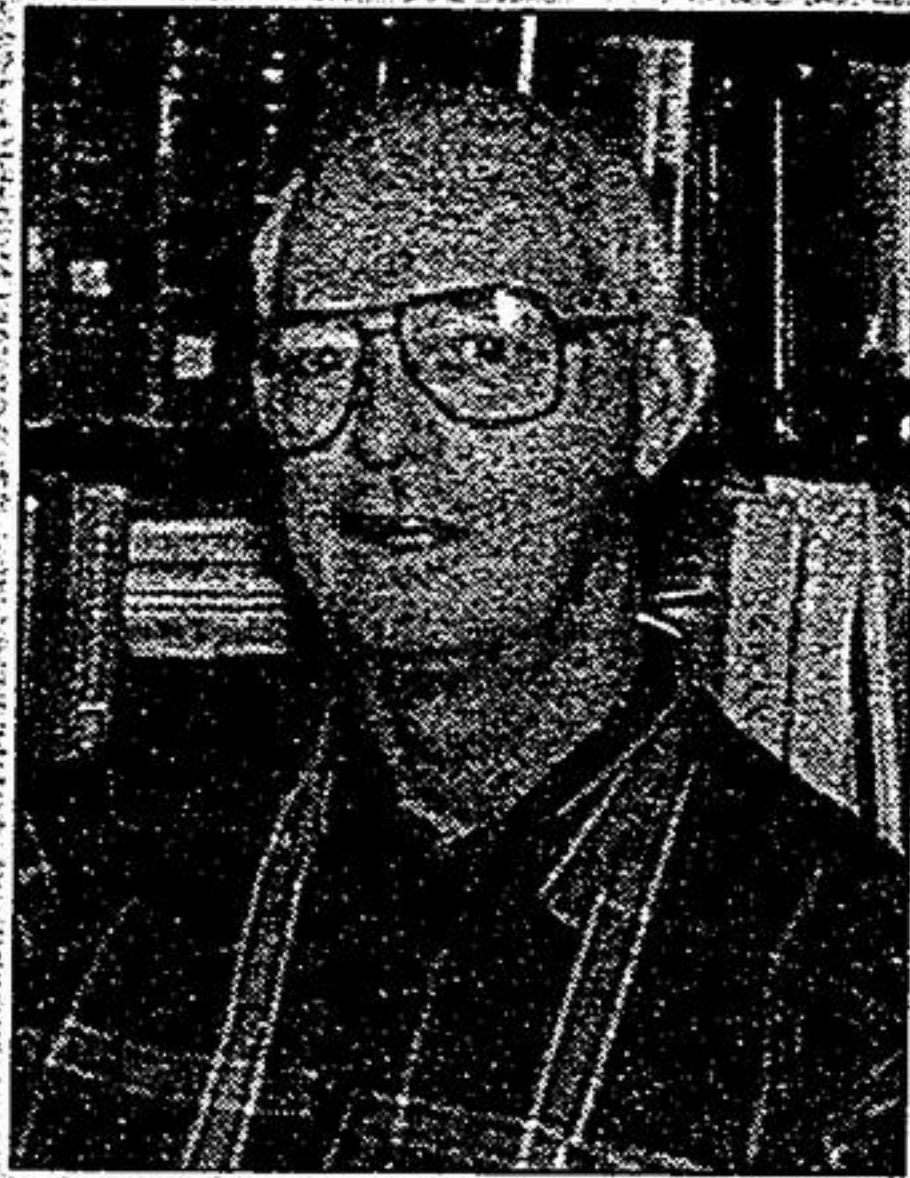
You can't look after the ones you're committed to. You can't look after the whole world. There's a limit.

Dr. Petrie said the government needs to increase the supply of doctors, but acknowledged there's no quick solution.

"It's a bad situation, but we do the best we can."

Mayor Sue Sherban is establishing a task force of politicians, community leaders and representatives from the town's medical community to develop a doctor recruitment strategy.

"Like every community that's growing, doctors need to grow



DR. DONALD PETRIE: Stouffville physician says government must increase number of doctors.

with it," she said. "We don't really have the space right now for physicians. Doctors want a turn-key operation where they can walk in and have the facilities ready to begin practising. We need somebody to come to the table and build a facility that would be physician friendly."

To make sure the situation in Georgina isn't repeated, Ms. Sherban acknowledged the town will have to walk a fine line between attracting new doctors and ensuring current physicians don't feel alienated.

Rural areas aren't the only communities hoping to improve health care.

Despite expansion projects at York's three existing hospitals, Vaughan residents and community leaders are calling on Queen's Park to approve a new hospital for their city.

Demands for improved health care aren't limited to York. The issue is highlighted by Ontario's doctor shortage.

The Ontario Medical Association estimates almost 1,600 doctors are needed immediately to care for the more than 1 million residents across the province who can't get a family physician.

"This shortage is expected to

increase to between 2,400 and 3,400 physicians by 2010, depending on the degree of government action," a report from the association warns.

"Ontario's current physician shortage is projected to almost double within 10 years. As a result, it is anticipated that between 1.4 million and 2 million Ontarians will be seriously hindered in their access to medical treatment."

During last fall's provincial election, Premier Dalton McGuinty promised to improve access to health care by establishing 150 family health teams, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other health care professionals.

According to Mr. McGuinty, the teams will ensure patients have round-the-clock health care, provide patients with comprehensive care and ease line-ups at emergency rooms.

Thornhill MPP Mario Racco serves on a legislative health and social issues committee and expects the committee to begin addressing the doctor shortage within days.

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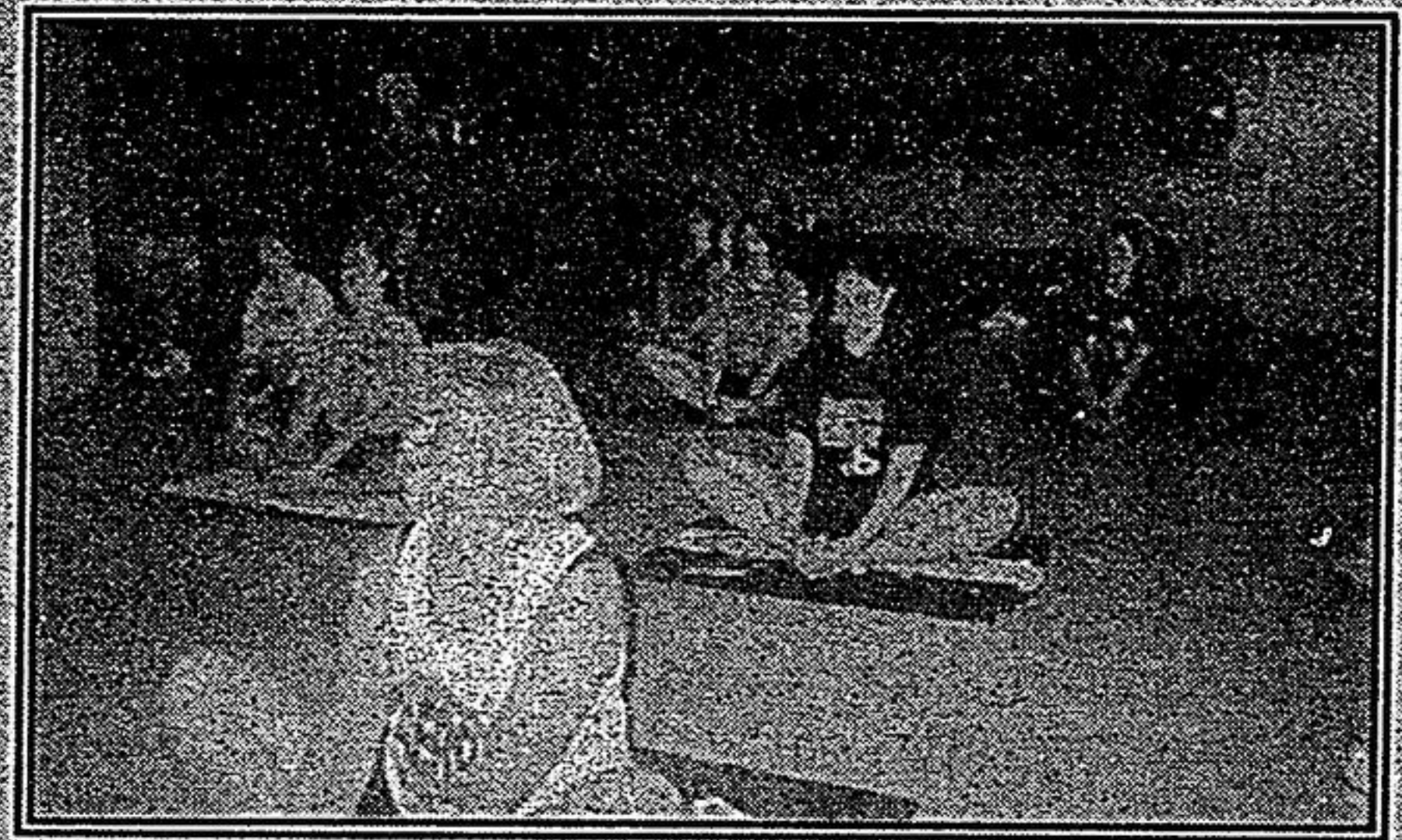
The focus will be on increasing medical school spaces, removing barriers preventing foreign doctors from practising and providing incentives for physicians to work in underserved areas.

"Hopefully, in a few years we can start providing enough additional doctors to provide the services we need," he said. "Doctors are needed and expected in one of the wealthiest provinces in the world."

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