

Rates of infection well below average at York hospitals

BY MICHAEL POWER
Staff Writer

Rates of *C. difficile* infection at York Region's three hospitals remain well below provincial and national averages, spokespeople for the hospitals said this week in the wake of criticism of the province's health minister over reporting of the illness.

Mandating Ontario hospitals to report *C. difficile* cases is a good idea, provided differences between facilities don't skew results, said Danny Chen, an infectious disease specialist at York Central Hospital.

Unlike measles, influenza and some other communicable illnesses, hospitals don't have to report C. difficile to public health officials.

"I think it's a reasonable thing to do; more information for patients is better than less," said Dr. Chen. "It does, to a degree, reflect the infection control practices that are going on (in hospitals)."

Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smith-

erman announced Tuesday hospitals will have to report all cases of the potentially fatal infection by Sept. 30.

Unlike measles, influenza and some other communicable illnesses, hospitals don't have to report *C. difficile* to public health officials.

Opposition parties called this week for a public inquiry into the extent of *C. difficile* in Ontario's 157 hospitals, a move Mr. Smitherman initially rebuffed.

An outbreak of *C. difficile* in Quebec in 2003 claimed 2,000 lives and the opposition insists 260 deaths in Ontario hospitals are attributable to the illness.

"The *C. difficile* outbreak in Ontario has now claimed four times more lives than SARS," said John Tory, the Progressive Conservative leader.

While reporting the condition may be a good idea, the province must ensure information collected from hospitals reflects the same conditions, Dr. Chen said.

For instance, older facilities without single rooms will have a tougher time keeping infection rates down, he said. Such differences between hospitals must be taken into account, he said.

In 2005, the rate of *C. difficile* in hospitals across Can-

ada was six cases per 1,000 patients, while the Ontario average was 7.5 cases. York Central's average has remained below those rates, Dr. Chen said.

The hospital reports its rates each month to its board of directors.

"It's a serious health issue and it's something we track on a monthly basis," he said.

Rates of *C. difficile* remain low at Markham Stouffville Hospital as well, said the facility's vice-president of clinical programs and chief nurse executive, Janet Rob-

erts.

The hospital also has reported its rates to its board but hasn't made the numbers public, she said.

Hospital staff question patients on infectious diseases from when they are admitted to the time they leave.

Rates of infectious diseases are then reported to senior staff and the board of directors.

"We're very happy to say our infection rates are low in this organization and that's due to the vigilance of our staff," Ms Roberts said.

Southlake Regional Health Centre provides its rates of *C. difficile* to those who call asking for the information, said the hospital's manager of infection prevention and control, Brigitte Boaretto.

Southlake has its rates of MRSA, posted on its website and plans to post its *C. difficile* rates, Ms Boaretto said.

"We're very transparent with that information," she said.

"They call and we give it to them."

In the first quarter of 2008,

the lower limit for the rate of *C. difficile* in Canadian hospitals was 3.4 cases per 1,000 admissions with Southlake's rate falling well below, at 0.89 cases per 1,000 admissions, she said.

Sharing such information with the public meant patients would be better informed about their health care, Ms Boaretto said.

"Why not? If we're going to be transparent with the community I don't think it would be a bad thing to make it part of the mandate for a hospital," she said.

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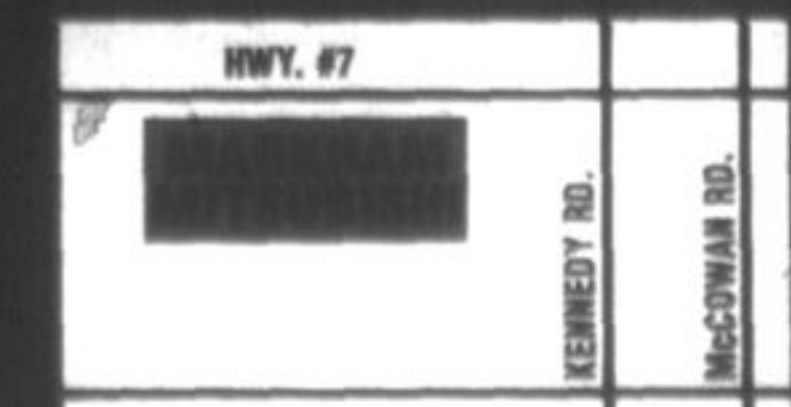
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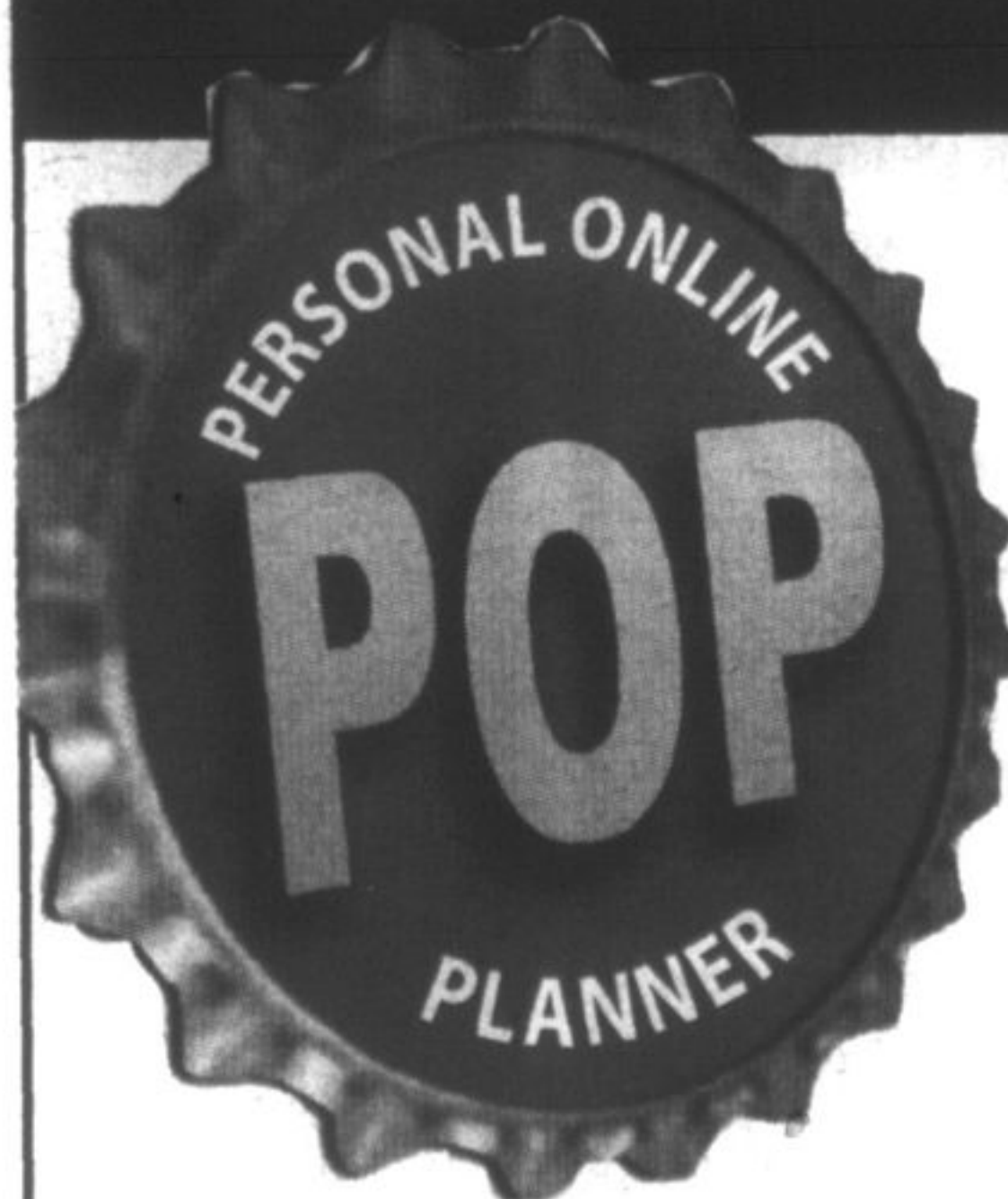
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