

# Health networks need fixing: prof

BY DAVID FLEISCHER  
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The way Ontario funds health services lags behind other provinces and while our 14 LHINs shouldn't be put out to pasture, some retooling is in order, experts say.

"It's baby steps. This model has a number of problems," health policy analyst and associate professor at the University of Toronto Dr. Michael Rachlis said.

York Region is included in the Central LHIN, one of 14 provincewide that plan, fund and manage health services, including hospitals, Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) and mental health and addiction agencies.

Including York Region public health in the Central Local Health Integration Network, eliminating hospital boards and introducing more local boards to better engage the community would all be considered improvements, Dr. Rachlis said.

"The LHINs have not been a perfect experience, but we have to learn the lessons we can and we can learn a lot from what's gone on in other provinces, too," he added.

*'We're still young organizations, so we've been ramping up, developing and hiring expertise.'*

Dr. Rachlis' comments come on the heels of the opening of the local LHIN's books for the first time in two years, revealing rising administrative costs and a failure to meet most wait-time targets.

Annual reports for 2008-09 and 2009-10 show the Central LHIN spent \$4.5 million on administration in the fiscal year ending March 31, of which 64 per cent went to salaries and benefits.

It's a 46-per-cent increase from the \$3.1 million spent in 2007.

Salaries alone rose to just under \$3 million last year, compared to \$1.4 million in 2007.

Most of those costs can be attributed to the hiring of more staff, chief executive officer Kim Baker said.

Central LHIN staff has nearly doubled in four years from 16 to 31.

"We're still young organizations, so we've been ramping up, developing and hiring

expertise," she said.

The Central LHIN also had to take on special projects, directed by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, such as planning the yet-to-be-built Vaughan hospital.

It spent \$224,282 on consultants for the 2009-10 fiscal year, a decrease from the \$608,219 spent in 2007 and less than the \$481,000 spent this year in the Hamilton-Niagara region.

The nine-member board earned \$78,750 in per diems, Ken Morrison also received \$47,500 as chairperson. But even with travel expenses, the board spent \$10,000 less than in 2009 and came in \$14,000 under its \$204,000 budget.

Despite increased spending, wait times remain a challenge for the Central LHIN, as it met only four of 11 targets, including cancer surgery, cataract surgery, hip replacement and knee replacement.

A few categories are close, but others have a ways to go. For example, the LHIN has 261 long-term care beds per 1,000 people, well below the provincial average of 313.

However, there are signs of improvement, Ms Baker said.

While high priority emergency room admissions increased 14 per cent — more than anywhere else in Ontario — the LHIN had the sixth-best improvement rate.

Central LHIN posted the third-best improvement rate on ER wait times and had the lowest number of patients return after being discharged.

"It's a journey and it's important to show we're making progress," Ms Baker said.

But critics are not impressed.

"More and more, people are becoming aware that LHINs are not an accountable model," Progressive Conservative democratic reform critic Steve Clark said. "Our priority is front-line, local health care."

Conservative leader Tim Hudak pledged to eliminate the LHINs, but hasn't revealed an alternative.

The provincial government postponed a review of LHINs until after the 2011 election.

The Central LHIN stretches from North York, through York Region, up to southern Simcoe County.

It was responsible for the allocation of nearly \$1.7 billion to health care providers last year. It may seem unwieldy, but the LHIN does break down its coverage area into planning areas and bring providers together to talk about local challenges.

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In no more than 250 words, explain why you want to pursue a career in journalism and how this bursary will help you achieve that dream. For more details, go to [yorkregion.com](http://yorkregion.com) Send entries to [dkelly@yrmg.com](mailto:dkelly@yrmg.com)

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#### PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

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York Region

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