

Ontario Medical Association worried about wait times, doctor shortage in Peel

Association calling on political parties to adopt recommendations ahead of election

By Zachary Roman

The Region of Peel needs at least 202 more doctors, according to the Ontario Medical Association (OMA).

The OMA is a membership organization that represents Ontario's physicians and advocates for the health of all Ontarians.

On May 10, the OMA called on political parties to prioritize fixing high wait times in Ontario's health care system, as well as doctor and mental health professional shortages, as Ontario heads to the polls on June 2.

Peel Region is worse off than other parts of the province when it comes to some wait times, according to data provided by the OMA in a news release.

Province-wide, about 29 per cent of Ontarians receiving knee surgery waited longer than provincial targets, according to the latest public data from Ontario Health, along with 63 per cent who had MRIs. However, in Peel Region, 40 per cent of people waited longer for knee surgery in Brampton and between 56 and 75 per cent waited longer for an MRI in Mississauga, they said.

To fix this and other health care issues, the OMA has issued 87 recommendations to political parties in a detailed plan called Prescription for Ontario: Doctors' 5-Point Plan for Better Health Care. The association hopes parties will adopt these recommendations as part of their official platforms, and the OMA is ready to work with whichever party is elected this June.

Dr. Rose Zacharias, President of the OMA, spoke to the Citizen about how the provincial government can improve health care in Peel Region. She said something she wants to see is funding to streamline computer systems that doctors have to use. She explained for every one hour a doctor spends with a patient, there's two spent on the computer for documentation. In rural areas, this can be made worse by slower internet connections.

However, Zacharias said the OMA's number one priority is reducing the backlog of care left by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the COVID-19, she said people were waiting too long, and since the pandemic had to take priority, those wait times have been extended.

We do have an idea, a very concrete idea, that we've put forward in our prescription for Ontario. We're talking about freestanding clinics that we're calling 'independent ambulatory care centres', where people would be able to go and get those lesser emergent, lesser acute procedures and screenings done, which would then free up the hospitals to do that more acute and emergent type care, she said Zacharias.

And it's really a modernization of the health care system that we're calling for, still publicly funded and publicly administered with OHIP dollars, there wouldn't be any user fees or queue jumping and we are by no means talking about privatizing health care. These freestanding clinics would be connected to hospitals and be fully integrated into our public system.

Zacharias said this would be a sure-fire way to reduce wait times on things like the aforementioned knee surgeries and MRIs. When wait times are too long, Zacharias said patients' conditions can worsen, their pain can increase, and their mental health and well-being can suffer.

She said it's medical professionals' job to care and that they've been doing their best during what's been an incredibly challenging time but they feel as though they have their hands tied; that they need more resources and more room in hospitals.

Another thing Zacharias said would improve care for patients, and free up room in hospitals, is expanding and improving home care in the province.

'Traditionally, we thought, 'Oh, someone's sick, go to the emergency department and be admitted to the hospital until you're better', said Zacharias.

While of course sometimes that's appropriate, a lot of times it isn't necessary. She gave the following example of an older patient with a chronic condition:

'If you can help someone who's got pneumonia, it's exacerbating their asthma, but they're able to stay at home, get the oxygen support they need, even the antibiotics that they need, to have a nurse visit daily, to have a physician stop by and see them. They can stay in their home, they can eat their meals from their kitchen, their spouse can be caring for them. They can have their kids in the house, checking on them... it's more comfortable for the patient.'

As the baby boomer generation ages, Zacharias said home care will become increasingly important as that population increasingly draws on the health care system.