

Ontario reducing wait times for surgeries and procedures]

By **Brian Lockhart**

The Ontario government has announced it is going to make it easier and faster for people to access the publicly-funded surgeries and procedures they need by further leveraging community surgical and diagnostic centres to eliminate surgical backlogs and reduce wait times.

The announcement said the government will significantly expand the number of surgeries being done through community surgical and diagnostic centres and do so with measures in place to protect the stability of health human resources at public hospitals, including requiring new facilities to provide detailed staffing plans as part of their application and requiring a number of physicians at these centres to have active privileges at local hospitals.

“When it comes to your health, the status quo is no longer acceptable,” said Ontario Premier Doug Ford. “Our government is taking bold action to reduce wait times for surgeries, all while ensuring Ontarians use their OHIP card to get the care they need, never their credit card.”

Community surgical and diagnostic centres have been partners in responding to the pandemic and addressing the pandemic-related backlog in surgeries. The announcement said increasing community delivery of surgeries has proven to increase patient and provider satisfaction and reduces the risk of a rescheduled appointment.

Surgeries performed at these centres will be publicly funded.

The process will be to use a three-step plan that integrates and uses state-of-the-art facilities to speed up how quickly people are able to get surgeries and procedures using their health care.

With cataract surgeries currently having one of the longest wait times for procedures, new partnerships with community surgical and diagnostic centres in Windsor, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Ottawa, will add 14,000 additional cataract surgeries that will be performed each year. These centres will perform the additional 14,000 surgeries with existing health human resources.

To further reduce wait times, the government is expanding the scope of community surgical and diagnostic centres to address regional needs with a continued focus on cataracts as well as MRI and CT imaging and colonoscopy and endoscopy procedures. Beginning in 2023, these procedures will be non-urgent, low-risk, and minimally invasive and in addition to shortened wait times, will allow hospitals to focus their efforts and resources on more complex and high-risk surgeries.

Since early detection and diagnosis of a health issue has a benefit on a patient's quality of life, prognosis, and treatment, the government will introduce legislation in February, that will, if passed, allow existing community diagnostic centres to conduct more MRI and CT scanning s people can access publicly funded diagnostic services faster and closer to home. The next step will also expand surgeries for hip and knee replacements.

As the province expands the role of community surgical and diagnostic centres, Ontario Health and the Ministry of Health will continue to work with system partners and clinical experts to put in place the highest standards of quality and safety.

“Timely and convenient access to surgery and diagnostic imaging is critical to keeping people healthy,” said Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. “This plan will boost the availability of publicly funded health services in Ontario, ensuring that Ontarians currently waiting for specialized surgeries will have greater access to the world class care they need, where and when they need it.”

As waits times are shortened, Ontario Health must ensure that these centres are included in regional health system planning. Funding

agreements with new community surgical and diagnostic centres will require these facilities to work with local public hospitals to ensure health system integration and linkages, including connection and reporting into the province's wait times information system.

Community surgical and diagnostic centres will also coordinate with local public hospitals to accept patients that are being referred, ensuring people get the surgery they need as quickly as possible.

There are currently 206,000 people estimated to be waiting for surgical procedures in Ontario.

Community surgical and diagnostic centres licensed under the independent Health Facilities Act, currently perform around 26,000 OPIP insured surgeries and procedures annually.