

Collateral damage



By Nate Smelle

One would think that with the stench of the COVID-19 pandemic still lingering in our hospitals and graveyards throughout Ontario and around the world, that we would have learned our lesson regarding the value of public health care. However, in light of the recent emergency room closure in Minden that is obviously not the case.

On April 20, Haliburton Highlands Health Services shocked the communities they serve with a carefully-crafted press release entitled, "HHHS Brings Together All Emergency and In-Patient Services at Haliburton Site as of June 1, 2023." Reading the headline only, as many unfortunately often do, the reader is given the impression that by "bringing together" all emergency and in-patient services at the Minden Hills emergency department with those at the Haliburton site, HHHS will be able to, as an open letter from their president and CEO Carolyn Plummer suggests, "run a more sustainable operation in the long-term, while supporting the well-being of our staff and physicians."

In reality, with the sugar-coating removed, the closure of the ER means that as of June 1, those in need of emergency care in the Township of Minden Hills and the surrounding communities will need to pray harder and longer as they travel further to access the emergency health care services they require. As every one of the dozens of emergency first responders "paramedics, firefighters, police" that I have interviewed over the past decade has told me, "seconds save lives."

The distance between the emergency department in Minden to the Haliburton site at 7199 Gelert Rd. is approximately 22 minutes. In other words, anyone residing within 11 minutes of the Minden ER at 4575 Deep Bay Rd. will have at least an additional 11 minutes of travel time before they can access the potentially life-saving health care services they need. If seconds can save lives, then imagine how many lives can and tragically will be lost during the 660+ seconds it will take to transport patients from Minden Hills to the Haliburton emergency department.

Doing my best to try and understand the reason why Haliburton Highlands Health Services' board of directors decided it would be a good idea to close the emergency department in Minden, I spent a few hours researching the issue on Sunday afternoon. While scrolling through the coverage I felt my heart rate speed up when a cookie popped up from the bottom of my screen with a headline that I thought said "NH ER closing."

Clicking the cookie and jumping down the rabbit hole immediately, I quickly discovered that my eyes had deceived me when I noticed that it actually said, "MH ER closing." Relieved to see that our local emergency department in Bancroft was not, at least for now, one of the rural health care facilities on the chopping block in Ontario, I resumed my research into our neighbouring

community's troubling situation.

As I read through the letter from Plummer explaining Haliburton Highlands Health Services' reasons for the closure, there was one statement by the CEO which I found provided insight into why they decided the closure was necessary.

‘There is a global health human resources crisis when it comes to nursing and medical staff, as well as support workers,’ wrote Plummer. ‘This is not a new crisis, but we've felt the effects of it here at our local level. The ongoing shortage of nursing and medical staff means we need to be as efficient as possible with how we allocate our staff and resources.’

It might be true, as the letter also states, that having more staff available at a single site will help create a more stable staffing situation in Haliburton; however, the improved service in Haliburton will do little to nothing for those living or cottaging nearer the Minden ER who are in immediate need of emergency care. Furthermore, with time being of the essence when it comes to emergency health care, injuries and ailments will inevitably become more difficult to treat and heal by the time many patients reach the facility in Haliburton. This in turn will only increase the cost of health care in Ontario.

Deep down, everyone of us, even those at the top of the chain of command who are ultimately responsible for the closure such as Premier Doug Ford and Minister of Health Sylvia Jones, knows that the this decision will cost lives. It is a reduction of both the quantity and quality of health care being provided in Haliburton County, that all Ontarians, especially those of us in rural and northern communities need to be paying attention to. Sadly, as long as the provincial government continues to wage war on our public health care system there will be collateral damage. It is critical that our so-called leaders understand that, as we learned all too well during the COVID-19 pandemic, every statistic in health care comes with a face and a name.

We also must remember that what happens in Minden and at Queen's Park, does not stay in Minden and Queen's Park. Back in February I joined a dozen or so members of the Ontario Nurses Association on the picket line in Bancroft. Upon speaking with the nurses and learning about their fight to protect our public health care system, it became clear how crucial it was for the province to step in and support them with, as their signs read, ‘Better Staffing, Better Wages, and Better Care.’ The next day I reached out to our MPP in Hastings-Lennox and Addington Ric Bresee, explaining how I was at the Ontario Nurses Association's picket in Bancroft, and each of the nurses I spoke with said they felt disrespected by the Ford government. I passed along how several of them expressed their outrage by the fact that the Premier who once called them ‘heroes’ was appealing the Superior Court of Justice's decision declaring Bill 124 unconstitutional and void.

Despite the fact that I did not receive a response from our MPP, I reached out to him again in March with the following questions:

- 1) What lessons have you and the Ford government learned about health care in Ontario from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) How does your government plan to help improve the quality of health care in North Hastings?
- 3) Should private for-profit companies be able to profit off of people fighting disease or healing from an injury? If so, please explain how the Ford government plans to provide Ontarians with the best quality of health care available while allowing private companies to profit.
- 4) How will your government's decision to privatize certain health care services and surgeries improve the quality of care being provided through the already under-staffed and under-funded public health care system?
- 5) According to StatsCanada, 19.1 per cent of Ontarians are 65 years of age or older. As the Baby Boomer generation ages and this province's senior population grows along with the need for health care services, what is your government doing to ensure our Elders will receive the best quality health care possible?
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation about the state of health care in Ontario and the direction it is headed?

Well, it is now June, and although I have contacted our MPP more than a dozen times, I am still waiting for a response. Considering our former Conservative MPP Daryl Kramp would almost always respond to our newspaper's requests for information on the same day, I am not holding my breath longer for Mr. Bresee; especially now that our public health care system has become a second-string priority.

Still, if our MPP would like to respond to any or all of these questions; or share his thoughts on public health care with his constituents, we will certainly publish every word.