

Life or death?



By Nate SmelleWell, if the blanket of wildfire smoke that has been smothering us on a regular basis this summer wasn't enough of a reason to stay indoors and reconsider our course of action, the press release from Quinte Health that turned up in my inbox last Friday is yet another warning that we are heading in the wrong direction. With the intention of helping the community to understand what to expect as a result of the "critical physician staffing shortages in our emergency departments," Quinte Health informed the public that its hospitals "especially the North Hastings Hospital in Bancroft" is "at significant risk of having temporary, short-term closures over the summer." How is it possible that in a province and country as "wealthy" as ours we cannot find enough funding to keep our hospitals open? Without blinking, every year we fork over billions of tax dollars to subsidize the fossil fuel industry, despite the fact they are bringing in record profits. In Ontario we turn a blind eye to the degradation of our forests and wetlands to allow a relatively small group of developers to profit off of the irreversible damage they are causing to these ecologically sensitive ecosystems that clean our air and water. Yet still we cannot afford to keep our hospitals open? After learning of the permanent closure of Minden's Emergency Department this past April, I wrote a column that appeared in Bancroft This Week, entitled "Collateral damage." As those of you who read it may recall, while I was researching the closure I mistakenly read a pop-up on my screen as "NH ER closing" when it actually read, "MH ER closing." I wish that I was wrong, however Quinte Health's recent announcement proves that, as I said at the time, "what happens in Minden and at Queen's Park, does not stay in Minden and Queen's Park."

Now that those of us who call North Hastings home are faced with the dangers that come with living in a community where we are not guaranteed access to emergency health care services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we need to understand how this will impact our quality of life. I, like many of you reading this have required emergency care at our local hospital on several occasions since moving here 16+ years ago. Having seen our local team of physicians and health care professionals in action amid an emergency situation, there are no words to express how essential each and every one of them are in helping to uphold our healthy quality of life.

Thinking back on one trip to our local emergency room after I tore a three inch flap of flesh from the palm of my hand back in 2013, I have to wonder what my life would be like now if I had showed up at the hospital and found a "CLOSED" sign on the door. Even with the excellent care I received in my time of need I still feel the nerve pain in my hand when I swing a hammer or hold onto a steering wheel for more than two hours. If this accident would have happened now, on a day when the North Hastings Hospital is closed due to staff shortages, how much more severe would the nerve damage have been?

Relatively simple activities such as renovating a home or working in the garden come with risks. Even the healthiest and most fit among us can trip on a shovel and hit our head, chop off a finger, or end up with a splinter in our eye when working at home. Not

even taking into consideration the heightened climate-related health risks from the wildfire smoke for those with respiratory illnesses such as COPD are now dealing with, as we age, we are all faced with an increased risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke. What happens if you or a loved one experiences a heart attack or a stroke on one of the days our hospital is closed?

While our aging population in North Hastings is indeed a major factor being overlooked by our government and those responsible for the upcoming closures, young people need to take heed of this warning sign as well. What happens to the expecting mother who has problems as they go into labour on a day when our hospital is closed? What happens to a child having a potentially fatal allergic reaction on this same day at the same time?

When emergencies happen, as they inevitably will, where do we go to save ourselves and those we love?

Over and over again we hear about how progress in North Hastings is tied to expanding our tax base through encouraging people to move to our area. With this in mind, we need to ask ourselves who would want to live in a community where the closest, most reliable emergency department is more than an hour away? No matter which political party's sign we put on our lawns during election time, we all know that a country or province prosperous enough to provide its citizens the best health care possible is a better place to live than a country or province where people are forced to pay out of pocket. Fortunately, for now at least, we live in a democratic country where we have the opportunity to elect those who share our values and vision of the future.

Still, we cannot wait until the next provincial election on June 4, 2026 to let the Ford government know how important this issue is. If public health care is something that matters to you, or, even if it doesn't, I invite you to share your opinion with our community in the pages of Bancroft This Week. The more we engage with each other on this issue, the sooner we will find a solution to the crisis within our public health care system. The closure of hospitals and emergency rooms throughout Ontario, especially in remote cottage country communities such as ours, creates a life or death situation which can be avoided by simply establishing the right priorities. The sooner we realize this and take action to prevent our government from dismantling our public health care system, the more lives we will be able to save.