



dialogue

February 1, 2007

A bi-weekly update on issues
affecting health care in Ontario

**Info on Federal role in Health Care:
Canadian Health Coalition**
<http://www.healthcoalition.ca/>

Consolidation of lab services may lead to longer waits

17

Lab workers in Muskoka and the Sault fight plans to ship work out to distant facilities

Consolidation of regional lab services may lead to longer waits for test results, especially outside of Ontario's large urban areas.

OPSEU lab workers in Bracebridge and Huntsville are fighting potential layoffs after Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare released a Jan. 16 review recommending the shift of most lab services to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Barrie. Two of three doctors on the review are from the RVH.

The report also recommends terminating a lengthy partnership between the hospital labs and Gamma Dynacare unless the government increases funding. Ending the arrangement would mean the loss of outpatient testing which makes up most of the hospital lab work.

Sending inpatient tests to Barrie, and outpatient work to Gamma Dynacare's facility in Brampton, will impact the length of time it takes to receive test results and increase the likelihood of lost or damaged specimens.

That could mean longer stays in isolation for some patients, and doctors may be forced to treat patients in ER "blind" — without access to previous results for bloodwork performed at Dynacare. For cancer patients, the increased wait times may only further delay urgent treatment. Infection control monitoring will also be made more difficult.

If Gamma Dynacare's work is transferred to Brampton, it means local doctors will have to call the company's 1-800

line for results, a process much more cumbersome and time consuming than accessing results directly at the hospital. The company's 1-800 line does not operate 24 hours per day.

Many tests are now being shipped to Sudbury and Barrie for lack of an available pathologist, although the hospital has committed to filling the present vacancy with one to two pathologists. However, activists are questioning why the hospital is having such recruitment difficulties when hospitals in Barrie, Orillia and North Bay have recently been successful.

Recruiting a pathologist may be much more difficult after the hospital openly stated it is working on a lab model that does not require a pathologist.

The hospital acknowledged Dec. 20 that sending lab tests outside the region is more expensive than providing a pathologist and performing the tests in-house.

Meanwhile workers at the Sault Area Hospital are battling layoffs as MDS Diagnostics — which has managed the lab since 2004 — plan to export more of the hospital-based work. The hospital lab has lost five full-time equivalent positions since last October. The cuts have created "insane working conditions" for those workers left on the job, according to Local 620 President Margaret Rafter. The union fears that the cuts will lead to errors in testing results.

Long term care workers win battle for standards

Staff at Ontario's long term care homes have won the battle to establish minimum staffing and care standards.

For the past month OPSEU, the Ontario Health Coalition and other allies have been lobbying hard for such standards to be included as part of Bill 140 — Long Term Care Homes Act, 2006.

The amended legislation will require the Ontario cabinet to set a minimum staffing standard in regulation. This regulation is expected later in the spring.

OPSEU highlighted the need for such standards in presentations before the Standing Committee on Social Policy on Jan. 16 in Toronto and Jan. 22 in Kingston.

"You can't have quality care without appropriate staffing levels," says OPSEU President Leah Casselman. "This is a tremendous first step towards addressing understaffing in the sector."

Demonstrate at health ministers' meeting Feb. 9

Health ministers from across Canada are meeting in Toronto with their Federal counterpart Feb. 8 and 9 to discuss wait times strategies. The Ontario Health Coalition is organizing a demonstration at 9 am on Friday, Feb. 9 in front of the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel in Toronto, site of the ministers' meeting. Send a message that our public health care system is not for sale!