

# dialogue

May 8, 2008

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

## OPSEU takes Central East LHIN to court

Decision to cut 20 mental health beds done without community consultation

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May 16 OPSEU will be in court seeking an injunction to stop LHIN approval for the closure of 20 mental health beds at Rouge Valley Ajax-Pickering Hospital.

Approval for the cuts was part of a Central East LHIN board meeting that saw a series of hospital accountability agreements approved in about half an hour. No notice was given to the community that such deep cuts were ever on the table.

The West Durham community has been vocal in its opposition to the plan – more than a thousand residents came out to an April 10 meeting at the Ajax Community Centre. May 3rd 700 more marched through Ajax during a rain storm. Mayors throughout Durham have raised their opposition to the plan, while both Liberal and Conservative MPPs have pledged to raise the issue with the health minister.

The hospital plan calls for all 20 of the existing mental health beds to close at Ajax-Pickering. Instead, 20 additional beds will be “consolidated” at Rouge Valley Centenary Hospital in Scarborough. Five of these beds will be used to establish a psychiatric intensive care unit, the rest to be allocated as “medical/psychiatric beds,” which staff say will likely be set aside for geriatric patients.

The hospital justifies the move as part of a plan to deal with a \$78 million debt, although it has never explained how this transfer will save the \$600,000 per year Rouge Valley CEO



700 march through the rain May 3 to protest cuts to mental health beds at the Ajax-Pickering Hospital.

Rik Ganderton is projecting. Despite transferring the beds from one campus of Rouge Valley to another, the hospital has told the unions that there will be layoffs at Ajax-Pickering and new hires in the revamped unit at Scarborough. They promise that the size of the staff complement associated with the beds will remain the same.

The community has been told that anyone who is assessed as needing an inpatient mental health bed will be transferred from Ajax to the Centenary site, raising the question of the cost of such transfers in the savings equation.

This may leave West Durham with too few beds to accommodate patients experiencing psychotic episodes. Recently all 20 Ajax-Pickering beds were full, with the nearest free acute care mental beds available in Orillia. The only other acute care mental health beds in Durham Region are located at Lakeridge Health in Oshawa. These beds are also frequently full.

The legal challenge is the first real test of Bill 36, the Local Health System Integration Act, since it was passed in 2006.

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## **Injunction forces government to argue against own promises**

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The injunction will force the Ontario government to argue against the very conditions the health minister promised with the introduction of the LHINs – transparency and community involvement in the decision-making process.

The flawed bill is a mess of contradictions, the loopholes encouraging the LHINs to bring in more controversial decisions through the back door.

Further, in a voluntary integration between one or more health service providers, the LHIN has no obligation to be consistent with its own integrated health service plan.

The union is arguing that such inconsistencies are at odds with the LHIN's legislated purpose to engage the local community to determine local needs and priorities.

The Act acknowledges that “a community's health needs and priorities are best developed by the community, health care providers, and the people they serve.”

Adamant that the decision was firm, the LHINs created a 30-day cooling off period where consultations took place on the implementation of the plan, not the substance of the decision. The hospital has since placed any changes on hold until the injunction hearing can take place.

Patients complained at an April 10 public meeting that when they asked to participate in a stakeholders' on implementation of the issue, they were told they were not stakeholders.

With other transfers and cuts likely to follow, OPSEU's legal action has sent a signal to the LHINs across the province. Unelected and unaccountable to the communities, the LHINs will quickly lose credibility if major decisions affecting health services continue to be dealt with in secret and without community consultation.

The events in Ajax-Pickering are no doubt being watched closely in Eastern Ontario, where the two most eastern LHINs met this week to discuss the future of 64 transitional mental health beds at the Brockville Mental Health Centre.

George Weber, the CEO of the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, met recently with the Health Minister and representatives of the South East LHIN and Champlain LHIN to discuss options for the beds.

The community is concerned that the 64 beds will be moved to Ottawa to fill unrented space at the expensive P3 Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre.

The move may take patients further from their home communities and make it more difficult for families to participate in the caregiving. As many as 120 local jobs may be associated with these beds, creating an impact on the local economy.

OPSEU Local 439 is asking for meetings with Weber and the South East LHIN to further discuss options around the future of these beds.

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## **Ambulance members to attend OMERS meeting**

Ambulance Division members will make their case for equity with firefighters and police at the 2008 spring annual regional meeting of the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS) May 23 in Toronto.

Paramedics are asking for the right to negotiate retirement at age 60 with full pension – a right already held by firefighters and police.

The meeting follows a successful April 17 picket in front of the OMERS offices at 1 University Avenue in Toronto.

Active and retired members are being encouraged to register online to attend the upcoming meeting.

## **West Parry Sound CCAC ignores freeze on RFPs**

While the government says it is extending existing home care service contracts, one CCAC has decided that it will defy the existing freeze by awarding a service contract in the Parry Sound area.

The West Parry Sound CCAC is divesting home support workers to an agency selected through an RFP issued last October. The West Parry Sound CCAC was not part of the realignment of CCACs across the province. It is run directly from the West Parry Sound Health Centre. The Health Minister's office promised to look into the issue and reply soon.

## **Grey Bruce Health Unit on strike**

The Grey Bruce Health Unit's 27 office and clerical members went on strike May 1<sup>st</sup> after last minute negotiations failed.

The workers on the unit earn 15 per cent less than their counterparts in nearby units. Wages are 24 per cent less than those of non-union office administration staff working in the Health Unit itself. “The wage increase this employer offered might not even keep pace with inflation, never mind allowing us to catch up with our counterparts,” said Linda Owens, spokesperson for Local 276.

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## **In Brief**

### **CMHA—Elgin Branch joins OPSEU**

42 employees at the Canadian Mental Health Association—Elgin Branch have voted overwhelmingly May 5 to join OPSEU. They join part-time employees at the Temiskaming Hospital and workers from the Diagnostic Imaging Department at Barrie's Royal Victoria Hospital in expanding OPSEU's health care membership this year... About 30 members of the Health Care Divisional Council held a mass lobby at Queen's Park on April 16. The members were asking for legislation to protect them from workplace violence. They also asked the government to expand and speed up its regulation on safety engineered sharps. This was followed by a May 1<sup>st</sup> multi-union rally at Queen's Park.... The last Ministry-run psychiatric hospital in Ontario is divesting. The government recently announced that Mental Health Centre Penetanguishine will be part of a merger with two local hospitals, while Oak Ridge becomes part of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.