



NORTHUMBERLAND HILLS HOSPITAL

inspiring strength, dignity and compassion

NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NHH Emergency Department open for business – but physician shortages posing increased staffing and financial challenges

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY, Tuesday, October 9, 2007 – Physician shortages are a reality in many parts of our province today and tomorrow's election has brought further attention to this very important issue in public health. There are many reasons for the shortage, and in our area, they include:

- A growing population
- Increased competition among communities for family physicians
- Increased numbers of family doctors entering semi-retirement and/or moving to a part-time practice

Various solutions are in the works to ease the situation, but in the short-term, as the number of local people without a family doctor continues to increase, so too does the demand on the Emergency Department (ED) at Northumberland Hills Hospital.

The family physician shortage affects the ED in two ways: first, patients without family doctors go to the ED when they have a health issue that needs attention. Fewer local doctors therefore equal more people going to the Emergency Department each day.

Second, fewer family physicians in the local system means fewer doctors available to work in the ED. While some of the physicians who staff our ED focus their practice solely on ED medicine (in other words, they do not have a private practice outside of the ED), the majority of the physicians serving our ED today do so on a part-time basis. In other words, they divide very busy schedules (often 60- or 70-hour weeks) between shifts in the ED, their office hours and, in some cases, other specialty practices, such as anaesthesiology or obstetrics.

In recent months, the number of local family physicians able to manage this juggling act is diminishing and this—combined with increased demand and the loss of a full-time ER physician to an urban centre—is having a direct impact on NHH.

What is the hospital doing to manage the situation and avoid a temporary closure of the ED?

When doctors from inside our normal ED call group cannot be found to cover the three shifts per day in the ED, plus one Fast Track shift on week days, services such as MedEmerg or the provincial government's ED Coverage Project are called upon to fill the gaps. NHH is also working with the Central East Local Health Integration Network to find solutions. Fortunately, the gaps in the October schedule have been filled thanks to these resources and no ED or Fast Track closure is scheduled at this time.

External resources, however, are expensive and—more important—they are also scarce. The best solution to the problem that is being felt in communities across the province is to increase the number of physicians in our community. The Community Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee has successfully recruited one new family physician in recent months, but a minimum of seven are still required. Recruiting efforts for additional family physicians interested in ED shifts are the priority for the Committee's new physician recruitment coordinator, Mary-Jo Bathe.

Advance notice in the event of a service disruption

As noted above, the Emergency Department at NHH is open and all shifts in the immediate future have been filled.

"The most important point the hospital would like to convey today," emphasized Joan Ross, President and CEO, "is that while ER staffing challenges are a problem we share with hospitals across the province, to date, thanks to support from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, no Emergency Department in Ontario, to our knowledge, has had to close. NHH remains confident that our own challenges will be met. That said, should a shift closure be required, notice would be provided in advance to the community and to all partners, such as ambulance and emergency services, and the alternative options would be well publicized."

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: Jennifer Gillard at 905-377-7757 or jgillard@nhh.ca.

About Northumberland Hills Hospital - The Northumberland Hills Hospital (NHH) is located approximately 100 kilometres east of Toronto. The 137-bed hospital delivers a broad range of services, including medical/surgical care, complex/long term care, rehabilitation, palliative care, obstetrical care and intensive care. NHH also sponsors a Community Mental Health Centre and an Assertive Community Treatment Team. The hospital serves the catchment area of west Northumberland County. A mixed urban and rural population of approximately 60,000 residents, west Northumberland is comprised of the Town of Cobourg, the Municipality of Port Hope and the townships of Hamilton, Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand. NHH employs over 500 people and is an active member of the Central East LHIN. For more information, please visit www.nhh.ca.