

TITLE – Northumberland Hills Hospital: Focusing Attention and Resources on Acute Care Services

I've said that "a hospital is like a city within a city," meaning that it's a reflection of the community it serves. Northumberland Hills Hospital (NHH) is a jewel, created by the goodwill and generosity of our community. In return, you expect quality health services delivered close to home. This is the promise we are working to keep.

Hospital boards face a tremendous challenge to strike a balance between their legal responsibilities to balance the budget while protecting essential health services. This challenge has become even more daunting over the past year because of the economic downturn.

Given the strong relationship that our Hospital enjoys with its community, the Hospital Board took the necessary time over the past year to complete extensive internal and public consultations. A strong consensus emerged: NHH must focus its attention and resources on providing a comprehensive basket of high-quality, acute care patient services. Implicit in this consensus is that some patient services would be offered more effectively outside NHH by community-based health care providers, and that change is necessary.

What does this mean for our community? The NHH 2010/11 operating and service plan (the "plan") would see the vast majority of the services offered today continue into the future, preserving diagnostic imaging, maternity services, cancer treatments, surgical services, emergency services and palliative care among many others. And, while it is true that there will be some patient service and staff changes, we worked with the Central East Local Health Integration Network (CELHIN) – the government body that funds the NHH – to ensure that any patient services that will no longer be offered by NHH are offered in an alternative way close to home. On March 16, the CELHIN approved the plan.

In addition, NHH and the CELHIN have been successful over the past year in resolving four long-standing issues: identifying ways to manage the large number of alternate level of care (ALC) patients who would be more appropriately treated in the community; providing stable dialysis funding; improving non-urgent patient transportation; and, managing physician payments. I am happy to report that significant progress has been achieved over the past year in each of those areas. The financial and operating plan announced for the coming fiscal year includes a comprehensive approach for addressing ALC patients. The dialysis program is now operating within its budget and the funding deficiency has been addressed. Non-urgent patient transportation is currently being addressed collectively by all of the hospitals in the CELHIN. And finally, last year's budget included approximately a \$600,000 reduction in physician payments.

It is important to note that the service changes announced by NHH were made on the assumption that alternative health service providers or new solutions can and will be made available in the community to ensure the continuity of patient care. We have received commitments from both the CELHIN and the Ministry of Health in this regard, and we look forward to their support moving forward. In the event those commitments cannot be delivered upon, then our plan will be revisited and adjusted accordingly.

Unfortunately, the realignment of services announced this month by NHH has been characterized by some critics as the “thin edge of the wedge,” signalling the beginning of the piecemeal reduction of services at our hospital. This is completely untrue. By focusing on core services, the NHH plan recognizes government funding realities, meets our balanced budget requirements and minimizes the impact of these necessary changes on patient services and staff. Nobody will claim that this plan is perfect, or say that implementing it will be easy, or pretend that it won’t have a real effect on people. However, we would not have moved forward with this plan if we didn’t believe that it is appropriate in these circumstances, and that it will strengthen NHH in the years ahead.

NHH will be communicating in the days and weeks ahead about our plan, and what it will mean for patients. I encourage you to learn more by regularly visiting the NHH website (www.nhh.ca), or by reading our monthly community newsletter, *In Touch*. And, if you have a question about our plan, please feel free to contact me. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

I understand that this has not been an easy period for our staff, patients and community. I appreciate the energy and passion of all of the citizens we serve, but particularly those who have written letters and emails, attended forums, and called to offer their advice about how NHH should move forward. The fact that you care so much about NHH shows that the future of this hospital is very bright.

Robert Biron, President and CEO, Northumberland Hills Hospital