

Revolts & resignation cont'd...

Kincardine is not the only community in which physicians have taken a very public stand. After release of a study commissioned by McGuinty government appointees in the LHIN recommending the closure of the Emergency Department at the Charlotte Eleanor Englehart hospital in Petrolia, local doctors led the community fight-back along with the local health coalition and other groups.

Just prior to the release of the consultants' report, the Sarnia Lambton Health Coalition held a Town Hall meeting attended by most of the hospital doctors and more than 250 people to warn of the expected recommendation to close the ER. In response to the report, six hospital doctors threatened to resign.

Doctors, health professionals and municipal politicians lambasted the report and its recommendations for misinformation, flawed methodology and inaccurate research. The doctors noted that the Sarnia hospital had sent patients 70 times in the last year to Petrolia's ER because the Sarnia ER was overwhelmed. In response to the backlash and the doctor's threat, the LHIN has announced in the local paper that the proposal to close the Emergency Department is withdrawn for at least five years.

However, the doctors still do not have a written signed agreement and are not claiming victory just yet. Even with the potential reprieve for the Petrolia ER, Bluewater Health (the amalgamated hospital including Sarnia and Petrolia) still faces a significant deficit. Hospital officials have reported that they have to find \$5+ million in cuts in 2009/10. It is unclear what cuts may be undertaken to eliminate the deficit, unless the province provides adequate funding

The doctors in Petrolia and Kincardine are not alone in their anger over contradictory requirements to cut and close hospital services at the same time as they are working to try and recruit physicians to their communities. This issue has been raised in various communities across Ontario, as small and rural hospital services come under threat - particularly those in hospitals that were amalgamated under the Harris government and are dominated by the larger hospital such as those in Bluewater, Niagara, Durham and Quinte.

Indeed announcements of major service cuts have been fuel on years-worth of simmering anger over bias against small and rural hospitals within the amalgamated hospital corporations, the erosion of democracy, the loss of their communities' voice and problems with management styles. These have undoubtedly contributed to the doctors' actions, including a massive vote of non-confidence in Niagara and a public campaign by physicians in Sudbury.

In Sudbury, the hospital is facing a deficit of \$3.5 - \$5 million in 2009/10, and a severe shortage of beds is a major problem about which the provincial government has been warned for a long time. In November, the hospital announced it was closed to regional surgery cases unless the patient's life is threatened. Doctors publicly warned of dangerous

overcrowding and physicians leaving if the province failed to step in and provide adequate funds. The province announced funding for 24 additional beds (the hospital has an average of 100 ALC patients) and additional support for community care services.

And, finally for now, LHIN Board member Stephen Birch resigned in protest over the decision to close McMaster's Emergency Room to adults. "In my opinion the public's voice is not being heard and the reason I accepted this position was to make sure the public voices could be heard," he said, expressing additional concern that the LHIN decision lacked evidence-based research to support it. Birch is a professor in the Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis at McMaster University.

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Niagara

Communities in **Port Colborne** and **Fort Erie** have held mass demonstrations of more than 6,000 people to save their hospitals. The Health Coalition held Town Hall meetings attended by more than 350 people in **Niagara Falls** and **Port Colborne** to organize local fight backs last fall. Bus loads from **Port Colborne** attended our demonstration at Queen's Park in the fall. **St. Catharines** held a lively public meeting of more than 70 people to organize towards April 18 protests at local MPP Jim Bradley's office to pressure his government to stop the cuts.

Hamilton

The **Hamilton** Health Coalition held two protests and a massive Town Hall meeting a couple of weeks ago, attended by more than 900 people, according to the local press. Upcoming events include a rally on April 4 (see page 1) with "Fix Our World" and a major rally at MPP Sophie Aggelonitis' office on April 18 at noon.

Wallaceburg

A huge crowd of more than 800 people flooded a town hall meeting in **Wallaceburg**, spilling over into hallways and outside, forcing the local coalition to hold the meeting twice over. In this community the McGuinty government appointees in the LHIN are moving forward with a proposal to close all the General Medicine Beds and the Emergency Department. On March 20, the "Save Our Sydenham" group held a car convoy driving a hearse to local politician's offices including local MPP Maria Van Bommel. More than 10,000

names have been collected on petitions to save the hospital which local Conservative MPP Bob Bailey has promised to present in the legislature. Nurses are going on the road to explain the hospital cuts to area residents. The local committee is holding phone blitzes targeting Dalton McGuinty and Van Bommel's offices to put on pressure. There will be another large Town Hall on Friday March 27 and the community will be joining protests on April 18.

Petrolia

The Sarnia Lambton Health Coalition held two Town Hall meetings of more than 200 people each to analyse and plan the response to the plans to close Petrolia's ER. A County Council - sponsored meeting was swamped by hundreds - overflowing into hallways and overflow rooms. The community has been postering, signing post cards and phoning McGuinty. They will be joining Strathroy for April 18 protests. More information will be available shortly.

Bracebridge, Huntsville, Burke's Falls

The LHIN and the hospital have forming a task force to deal with a hospital deficit of \$2.5 m within the next 30 days. The CEO has stated that an earlier proposal to close one ER and one obstetrical unit will not happen. Community laboratory work has been cut from the **Huntsville, Bracebridge** and **Burke's Falls** sites and lab work is now being shipped to Brampton. No public disclosure on other proposed cuts and no plan for public consultation. The local health coalition is investigating and will be calling community events once we have more information. To date, the local coalition held Town Hall meetings in **Burke's Falls, Huntsville** and **Bracebridge** leading into Christmas. More than 200 people attended these meetings, along with area physicians and health care workers.

Kincardine

More than 200 people attended a Town Hall in **Kincardine** to stop the cuts to the local hospital, with the support of local physicians. The massive mobilizing of the community and the physicians pushed back the privatization of inpatient physiotherapy, though outpatient physio is still cut and other cuts loom. We will pass on updates as we get them.

Belleville, Picton & Trenton

More than 1,000 people attended a LHIN meeting to help stop a proposal to gut **Trenton's** hospital beds. The initial proposals have been withdrawn but it is still unclear how the hospital will eliminate its major deficit unless the McGuinty government provides adequate funding. A new Trenton Health Coalition has been set up. A recent Town Hall by the Friends of Prince Edward County in **Picton** attracted a large crowd of almost 100 to discuss and plan upcoming events, including a protest at local MPP Leona Dombrowsky's office in **Belleville** at noon on April 18. We are working to set up a Town Hall meeting in **Belleville** shortly. Information will be set out asap.

Bowmanville/Clarington

More than 200 attended a Town Hall Meeting this week and planned to put pressure on McGuinty to stop hospital cuts that threaten services including rumoured ER threats in the region.