

Ontario Health Coalition

15 Gervais Drive, Suite 305, Toronto, Ontario M3C 1Y8

tel: 416-441-2502 email: ohc@sympatico.ca www.ontariohealthcoalition.ca

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Attn: Assignment Editor

A Rural Nurse Speaks Out: New Report Appeals for Devastating Cuts to Small Community Hospitals to Stop

Wallaceburg – Shirley Roebuck is a Registered Nurse who, over the forty years of her career has worked in the largest hospitals in the country and also in a small rural emergency department. In recent weeks, she was appalled to see almost all remaining services cut, all beds closed, all staff laid off except for 5 surgical beds and an emergency department in her local hospital in Wallaceburg. Even the lab is closed.

Shirley has written a report to raise the alarm, and issue an appeal, to stop the devastating cuts to small community hospitals across Ontario. The report contains contributions by Dr. Ray Dawes, a rural physician in Barry's Bay and past president of the Section of Rural Medicine of the Ontario Medical Association; Fran Renoy, a retired health professional and resident of Prince Edward County where her local hospital in Picton has been gutted of its services; and Kathleen Tod, a retired Registered Nurse and former hospital administrator whose local hospital in Burk's Falls has been closed down entirely.

The report includes a list sampling of devastating cuts to small and rural hospitals across Ontario. The worst cuts have been in Niagara, Shelburne, Burk's Falls, Penetanguishene, Picton and Wallaceburg. The worse hit hospitals are the smaller sites of hospitals amalgamated in the 1990s. But many other residents in communities with small hospitals have seen their services decimated by relentless downsizing and movement of services out of town.

The report's authors note that small hospitals save money – costing less than half, per patient – and have a vital role in saving lives within the “golden hour” of resuscitation. Large community and tertiary care hospitals sit on the shoulders of small and rural hospitals, just as urban centres sit on the shoulders of farmers who provide the food for cities. The relationship is mutually beneficial: small hospitals triage patients, take the load of overburdened large emergency departments, and enable patients to recover close to loved ones. Large hospitals provide more specialized care, trauma care, care for rare illnesses and access to technology. Instead of “eating up” smaller hospitals, the report calls for a restored role to support large hospitals and improve care.

Ms. Roebuck notes that the issues facing small hospitals can be resolved and services restored, if there is the political will to do so. The report contains 24 recommendations to restore and improve small hospitals in Ontario, recruit and retain staff, restore sound funding and re-establish democratic governance.

“We need to restore the compassion in our health care system and health planning,” said Shirley Roebuck, RN. “Cuts have been ongoing ever since amalgamation of our hospitals in the 1990s. More cuts are coming this year, if we don't stop them, and people in our communities are suffering from the hardships of inadequate care and care far away from home.”

“We are Ontarians, urban and rural. We are citizens, taxpayers and we are voters. We deserve the same respect and dignity, and access to care, whether we live in the countryside or in a city,” she concluded. “The benefits of Ontario's Health Care system, and of the Canada Health Act with its principles of equity and fairness, should not be reserved only for urban dwellers.”

For more information: Shirley Roebuck 519-677-4460 (h) 226-402-2724(c); Dr. Ray Dawes, rural physician in Barry's Bay, past chair of Section of Rural Practice of the Ontario Medical Association 613-756-2320; Fran Renoy, retired health professional in Prince Edward County 613-476-6485; Kathleen Tod, retired R.N. and former hospital administrator in Burk's Falls 705-382-1074.