

Ontario Health Coalition

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

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

June 3, 2014

For Immediate Release

Attn: Assignment Editor

Coalition Warns Hospital Mega-Mergers in the Offing: Review of Ontario Political Party Platforms on Health Care

Toronto – In a field of health care platforms that are short on details, the most extreme proposals for health care come from the Ontario Conservative Party. Over the last two years, the PC Party has developed a scheme for total health care restructuring. The plan would see all of Ontario’s 146 public hospital corporations covering 224 hospital sites amalgamated into 30 – 40 “hubs” with appointed Boards of Directors (not elected).

This is the most massive health care restructuring proposal that Ontario has ever seen; impacting every hospital in Ontario. It is far larger in scale than the hospital restructuring under the Mike Harris government of the mid-1990s that is still causing turmoil, noted the Coalition in a report released today comparing the Ontario political party platforms on health care. The full report is at: www.ontariohealthcoalition.ca

The rationale for the restructuring of the 1990s was to reduce administrative costs and duplication. But costs soared to more than \$3 billion, according to Ontario’s Auditor General and the Coalition does not believe that projected “savings” were ever found. Deficits were not eliminated in merged hospitals; in fact many have faced regular deficits and cuts for more than a decade.

“Tough questions need to be asked about this plan,” urged Coalition Executive Director Natalie Mehra, noting that the largest merger in the Harris era was the Niagara Health System which amalgamated 8 hospitals across the Niagara peninsula.

“This was a giant merger – on the scale of the ones proposed by Hudak today -- and it has been an equally giant disaster”, she said.

These hospitals have faced steady deficits in the tens of millions of dollars almost every single year. Services have been continually cut. The Port Colbourne and Fort Erie hospitals have been gutted, losing all surgeries, inpatient acute care beds, and emergency departments. Welland hospital is now being gutted. Birthing and maternity have been closed in all the smaller hospitals across the peninsula. The Niagara Health System has been severely cut, bailed out, restructured, taken over by a Ministry-appointed Supervisor, and still faces a huge deficit. Now, the final solution approved this year, is to close five community hospitals outside of St. Catharines and replace them with one. The coalition notes that smaller community hospitals have been entirely closed or suffered devastating cuts reducing local access to care for thousands of rural residents from Wallaceburg and Wingham in the Southwest to Picton and Renfrew in the Southeast to Kincardine, Shelburne and Burk’s Falls.

Other party platform highlights:

- The Conservative Party plans to cut local hospital services and privatize them along with a range of other services that would be contracted out by the “hubs”.
- No party has said much about protecting local hospital services and stopping the cuts. The Liberal Party plans another year of 0% funding increases for hospitals, forcing more cuts. It also plans to cut local hospital services and contract them out to regional clinics. The difference between their plan and the Conservatives’ is that they promise the clinics will be non-profit. But the coalition is deeply concerned about the loss of local services and the dubious non-profit status of these clinics.
- The Conservative plan does not outline funding for massive amalgamations, and would almost certainly result in major cuts and closures to local hospitals.

- The NDP has promised to stop competitive bidding and home care privatization, while the Conservative Party has promised to expand it. All parties talk about improving access to home care and the Liberals promise a 5% budget increase for home and community care.
- The Conservatives and NDP have said they would eliminate the LHINs and the Conservatives would also eliminate the CCACs, transferring their roles to the 30 -4 0 “hubs” formed out of the merged hospitals. The Liberals have announced a review of the CCACs.
- Both the Liberals and the NDP are calling for increases to health care clinics: the NDP is promising 50 24-hour clinics and the Liberals are proposing 36 more Family Health Teams. The Conservative platform is silent on this issue.
- The Liberals have also promised a Primary Care Guarantee – that every Ontarian would have a family health care provider -- and pledged to cut hospital parking fees.
- The Liberals and Conservatives have a plan to slowly build more long-term care beds to address wait lists. The NDP has promised to eliminate waits for “acute long term care beds”.

Ontario’s health care system has seen improvements. The number of MRIs has vastly increased. Wait time management has improved and there has been an upsurge in the number of hip and knee and cataract surgeries over the last decade. Access to primary care has improved, the supply of family physicians has increased and will continue to do so as new doctors graduate. New nurse practitioner-led clinics are operational; community health centres have seen some increases; midwife birthing centres have been opened; and wait lists have been reduced for a whole range of hospital services, creeping back up slightly with the budget freeze (real dollar cuts) to hospitals in the last two years.

But there have also been cuts. Ontario funds health care less than most of Canada: we rank 8th of 10 provinces in health care funding both as a percentage of provincial GDP and on a per-person basis. This province has cut more hospital beds than anywhere else, closing almost 19,000 beds between 1990 and 2010. We now have the fewest hospital beds and the most crowded hospitals of anywhere in Canada. Small and rural hospitals are facing a new round of very grave cuts. Hospital funding in Ontario ranks last in the country per person. There are more than 21,800 people on wait lists for long-term care. There is no minimum care standard to ensure that enough care is provided in long-term care homes to meet the needs of the increasingly complex patients offloaded from hospitals. Home care funding has increased, but the number of patients offloaded from hospitals into home care has increased faster. Recent Ontario Budget funding increases restore funding levels per home care client back to the rates of the early 2000s.

For more information please contact Natalie Mehra at 416-441-2502 (office).