

Ontario Health Coalition

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Attn: Assignment Editor

Ontario Health Coalition calls for coroner's inquest, hospital supervisor: Niagara death of 18-year old raises concerns of public safety as result of emergency department closures, NHS financial position tantamount to bankruptcy

The Ontario Health Coalition is requesting a coroner's inquest into the death of Reilly Anzovino after a Boxing Day car accident. Ms. Anzovino was taken by ambulance to Welland because the closest emergency department in Fort Erie was recently closed due to budget cuts. She passed away prior to arriving at the hospital. This is the second death since the emergency department closures in Fort Erie and Port Colborne that has raised questions about whether the closures have contributed to avoidable fatality.

"We wanted to make sure that we were being respectful of the family's needs and desires and we wanted to make sure that an inquest is warranted. Now that the family has publicly asked for an inquest, and given the questions about whether Ms. Anzovino's tragedy could have been prevented, we have written to the chief coroner in support of an inquest," said Natalie Mehra, Director of the Ontario Health Coalition.

"This raises the issue of the human costs of hospital budget cuts across Ontario," she noted. "Hospital officials, consultants and the government have consistently downplayed the risks associated with closing small communities' emergency departments. They have even tried to sell the cuts as "improvements" and "quality care". A number of other communities are facing similar threats of ER closures. But longer travel times and ambulance backlogs mean that the "golden hour" – the time in which medical intervention can save a person's life or improve their health outcomes – is compromised. The result is higher risk of poor outcomes and even death. We hope that the coroner will put to rest the questions of the family and of the community and will make recommendations to prevent similar heart-breaking events from happening again."

The Fort Erie Emergency Department was closed and converted into an "Urgent Care Centre" several months ago. The community has been informed that CTAS levels I & II patients (heart attacks, strokes, traumas and other serious emergencies) cannot receive care at the Urgent Care Centre and ambulances have been redirected to the Welland hospital site 43 km away as a result. Since ambulances cannot carry blood – often needed in car accident traumas - there is widespread concern in the community that the removal of the emergency department in Fort Erie is a contributing factor in Ms. Anzovino's death.

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Prior to the closure of the Emergency Departments in Niagara, the Ontario Health Coalition conducted in-depth interviews with 50 paramedics across Ontario. The paramedics were unanimous in their concern about local ER closures and all stated that ambulances cannot replace the functions (including provision of blood and care for traumas) provided in local hospitals' emergency departments. Every paramedic gave concrete examples of how the plan to close local emergency departments will increase risks for patients, worsen wait times, deprive communities of access to care, or cause poorer care outcomes and even death. The full report "Putting Patients at Risk" can be accessed at: www.ontariohealthcoalition.ca

The Ontario Health Coalition released the report publicly in June 2009 and gave copies to health policy advisors in the Health Minister's office and in the Premier's office at that time.

To date, the closures of the emergency departments have not saved any money and the Niagara Health System (the name of the amalgamated hospital corporation covering hospitals in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Welland, Fort Erie and Port Colborne) is in worse financial shape than ever. According to reports at a LHIN board meeting before Christmas, the hospital has maximized its line of credit and cannot access more debt from its financial organization on its own. It is using capital funds for the new hospital to pay for operations, an untenable situation. The hospital requires significant cash infusions to meet cash flow requirements and is facing a deficit of up to \$16 million this year. The hospital is carrying more than \$100 million in accumulated debt and must pay to service this. According to the information provided in these reports at the LHIN board meeting in October, the hospital's financial situation is tantamount to bankruptcy. In addition, there have been repeated calls for a provincial investigation from clinical staff and local political leaders. The coalition is also calling for the province to send in a Supervisor to take over the hospital and sort out the financial and clinical issues.

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