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For Immediate Release

McGuinty Government Fails to Take Hospital Secrecy Off the Table: Amendment to Budget Bill Gives Hospitals Wide Berth to Hide Information

Toronto – Public interest and patient advocates are calling on Premier McGuinty to withdraw a controversial clause slipped into the Budget Bill that will enable hospitals to hide information from the public.

Earlier this month, the McGuinty government included a clause – Schedule 15 – in the Budget Measures Bill (173) that would enable hospital CEOs to shield from public scrutiny any information about quality of care produced for or by a hospital committee. The government has pushed through the budget bill quickly, opting for only one day of public hearings last week, on the eve of a national holiday. The hearings were held in Toronto only. Even with the very short notice, more than a dozen groups appeared at the hearings to ask the government to repeal the hospital secrecy clause.

Today, the government’s proposed amendment to the clause has been released. It provides no substantive change. The amendment proposal states that hospitals be allowed to hide:

"...information provided in confidence to, or records prepared with the expectation of confidentiality by, a hospital committee to assess or evaluate the quality of healthcare and directly related programs and services provided by a hospital, if the assessment or evaluation is for the purpose of improving that care and the programs and services."

The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will vote on amendments next Thursday, May 5, after which Bill 173 will go to the Ontario Legislature for final passage.

“The government’s amendment allows hospital executives to make some documents secret, by simply stamping “confidential” on them or retroactively suggesting that the records were intended to be private,” said Cybele Sack of ImPatient for Change, a patient advocacy group. “Our freedom of information laws are meant to increase transparency and this amendment undermines that spirit.”

“It is hard to believe that lobby groups, all of them vested interests, can succeed in stifling public access to information without any appropriate consultation and public policy process and despite opposition from all the public interest and patient groups that are aware of the issues,” noted Natalie Mehra, director of the Ontario Health Coalition. “The process and the substance are both profoundly anti-democratic.”

“The government’s proposal to extend hospital secrecy significantly undermines the government’s own Public Sector Accountability Act,” she added. “It puts the onus on patients and the public to undertake lengthy and complex appeals processes to justify seeking information from hospitals. It is entirely the wrong way around. Hospitals should have to show cause to keep information secret. They are publicly-funded institutions upon which every Ontarian relies for care. They should be more publicly accountable, not less.”

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