

Hospitals face slim budgets; Partnerships, specialized programs are helping hospitals treat more patients despite frozen funding

Waterloo Region Record

Fri Mar 1 2013

Page: B1

Section: LOCAL

Byline: Linda Givetash, Record staff

Source: lgivetash@therecord.com

The future of health care in the region will see hospitals serving more patients without more funding. The presidents of St. Mary's General, Grand River, and Cambridge Memorial hospitals say provincial funding is not likely to increase in the next five years.

"They don't have the same resources as other hospitals in Canada," said Don Shilton, president of St. Mary's General Hospital while speaking to the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce Thursday.

According to data presented by Shilton, Ontario's hospitals receive the lowest provincial funding per capita in the country. As a result, Ontario shows higher rates of patient care occurring outside hospitals. To do more with less, speeding up the process of treating and discharging patients is a priority. This trend of sending patients home faster is leading to a greater need for **home care** - an aspect of the health care system hospital leaders say is getting support.

"The Ministry of Health is keeping hospital funding (increases) close to zero per cent, but they're investing in the community to the tune of four per cent," Shilton said. "If we can invest in community (care) and help people be healthier and not need to go to hospital, that's absolutely the way to go." Preventive measures to ensure high-risk patients with existing health conditions don't suffer emergencies is another local priority.

"(Hospitals) have to be even better at working with **home care**," said Malcolm Maxwell, president of Grand River Hospital.

The goal is to reduce the likelihood of complications for patients with illnesses like diabetes, hypertension and kidney disease.

Already, local hospitals are seeing the success of collaboration with other health-care agencies. Hospitals in the Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network drastically reduced the amount of admitted patients waiting for care in the community to be moved to alternative or long-term care facilities.

In doing so, they have freed up beds to admit new patients faster.

Hospitals are also trying to develop specialty programs to streamline care across the region and prevent unnecessary overlaps that waste limited resources.

Specialized programs include the cardiac centre at St. Mary's, the cancer and mental health centres at Grand River and expanding mental health and intensive care units at Cambridge Memorial.

So far, hospitals are finding efficiencies and operating well with constrained resources.

Not only are budgets balanced, Grand River is providing care at lower costs than similar-sized hospitals across Ontario.

The expansion of Cambridge Memorial is continuing within budget, while its operating budget will see another surplus at the end of the fiscal year, said the hospital's president, Patrick Gaskin.

St. Mary's has the lowest hospital standardized mortality ratio in Canada said Shilton, making it the safest and most effective hospital in the country.

The role of the hospitals in the future will not be "a role as an island" as Gaskin explained, but one of collaboration that develops medical leaders while reducing costs and improving quality of care.