

Healthcare dialogue needs an honest broker

Research shows Ontarians unaware of rising healthcare costs

By John Crocker

For several years now, a growing chorus of academics, economists and think tanks have been issuing warnings that the growth in healthcare spending by governments is unsustainable. It represents almost 50% of spending now, and is on track to be north of 60%, and that will potentially crowd out other spending, they say. These are extremely serious issues that need to be at the centre of any discussion about the future of healthcare. However, changes to healthcare are too important to be left solely to special interests and elites.

The Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan, which represents nurses and other frontline healthcare providers, saw an opportunity to play a role in the discussion. We believe three things: first, that Ontarians benefit tremendously from our universal healthcare system; second, that the views of the people need to be a critical input in policy making in healthcare; and third that any reform to a program of this paramount public importance and sensitivity needs to happen through societal consensus, rather than edict.

We commissioned a major piece of public opinion research to understand what Ontarians felt about the healthcare system, its affordability, and potential changes to enhance long-term sustainability. We then convened a Think Tank of decision makers from the world of politics and government alongside many different participants in the healthcare system. It was a start at a dialogue. Key findings from our opinion research include:

- Few Ontarians believe that government spends too much on healthcare and even fewer think it should reduce its spending on healthcare.
- Providing healthcare is seen as the most important thing government does, and Ontarians want it privileged above other spending priorities. If government has to cut spending, they want healthcare protected from those cuts as much as possible and more so than any other spending envelope. If government has extra money to invest, Ontarians want the healthcare system having the first call on those resources.
- Ontarians are open to systemic reforms to the system that preserve quality at lower cost, but not to lower cost that undercuts quality. There is an openness to a range of ideas from how administration of the system is organized to how doctors are compensated, and even another crack at electronic records. Greater efficiency yes, less care no.
- Human resources is an area where reductions will hurt quality. Most Ontarians think the system currently has too few nurses, and could not maintain current quality levels with fewer.
- Shifting the focus of healthcare delivery from hospitals to community settings is very popular with the people of Ontario, assuming that the quality of care in the community is equal to what

it would be in the hospital. The emerging Community Health Clinics and Family Health Teams are seen as a very positive evolution in the way healthcare is delivered. But that is contingent upon being able to rely on equal quality, including equally experienced and qualified nurses and other healthcare professionals. To be positioned to have quality healthcare practitioners in every setting, they need access to benefits that support their mobility throughout the system and throughout their career.

Attendees at the Think Tank concluded that getting the process right was job one. Open and informed discussion among Ontarians is necessary to come to a set of reforms that have the consensus support of our society. Think Tank participants felt that the government should form an “honest broker” group to be a champion for the healthcare system, and open a dialogue between citizens and the government to create awareness of choices, solutions and potential tradeoffs in order to help build the healthcare system Ontarians want and deserve.

This group could evolve into a permanent healthcare research institute – a voice for all who serve or are served by the healthcare sector. Perhaps that way, we can all work together to build and preserve a healthcare system we value so much.

John Crocker is President & CEO of the Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan

Created in 1960, the Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan (HOOPP) is the pension plan of choice for Ontario’s hospital and community-based healthcare sector with over 340 participating employers and more than 250,000 plan members and retirees. HOOPP invests the assets of its \$31 billion Fund, administers the Plan and pays more than \$1 billion per year in pension benefits. The HOOPP defined benefit plan is a formula based benefit that provides security and peace of mind to Ontario’s healthcare workforce.