



## Rural docs provide rent-free space to keep lab open

Faced with the threat that the local x-ray clinic and blood lab would close, Drs. Lucy and Rod Rabb of Richmond, Ont., decided they had no choice but to subsidize the health care system. The husband-and-wife team from this Eastern Ontario town of 3700 are donating the \$500 monthly rent in an attempt to encourage the private companies involved to keep providing the services. Closure could have meant time-consuming trips to larger centres for local residents; Richmond is about 35 km southwest of Ottawa.

"We have a huge elderly population and a lot of young parents, so transportation is always an issue," says Rod Rabb, a University of Ottawa graduate who celebrated 30 years in practice in July. "We've also heard of people going to Kanata and waiting 3 to 4 hours."

An Edmonton company, Diagnosti-Care, took over many of the area's x-ray labs in February 1999 and began closing the smaller ones. The adjoining blood-testing clinic, owned by another company, would also have closed. The Rabbs considered all their options, but provincial restrictions on lab licences made the situation impossible: they weren't allowed to renew the local licence and no new licences were being issued. "We're not very high on their priority list," says Rod Rabb.

He says they're willing to continue subsidizing the rent for "quite a while. As long as they provide good service we'll let them stay. Unless, of course, another company wants to rent the space. The patients are very supportive," adds Rabb. "They think we've done the right thing."

Rabb, who told the local paper that "we're subsidizing the health care sys-



**The Rabbs:** "We're subsidizing health care."

tem and it's crazy," is not sure what the future holds for the provision of services in Richmond. "It's totally unpredictable." — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

## Prescription soap on the way?

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) wants Health Canada to restrict the availability of antimicrobial soaps in an attempt to slow the increase in the growth of resistant strains of pathogenic bacteria.

At its annual general meeting in Winnipeg in June, delegates passed a resolution urging Health Canada to "implement the appropriate legal instrument to restrict the availability of personal and home-cleaning products that contain nonconventional antimicrobial agents to health care settings in general and to make them available elsewhere only by nonpublic access through pharmacists."

Brad Colpitts, president of the Northwest Territories branch of the CPHA, moved the resolution. He told *eCMAJ Today*, *CMAJ's* online cousin, that the use of antimicrobial agents in hand soaps and other cleaners is rising

as manufacturers tout these new agents as "magic bullets" for killing bacteria. "Some companies are creating the perception that things can be cleaner if only consumers use these magic bacteria-killing bullets."

Many members of the health community predict increasing resistance to antimicrobial agents will be a major problem in the future as virulent strains of bacteria emerge, unaffected by existing antimicrobial agents. Efforts to date have concentrated on encouraging physicians to eliminate inappropriate prescribing of antibiotic medications as the way to combat the rise of resistant strains of bacteria.

Health Canada, through its Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, convened a consensus conference in Montreal 2 years ago in an attempt to come up with an action plan to limit the development and transmission of

antimicrobial-resistant organisms in Canada.

Delegates called for the establishment of a national committee to promote the issue of antimicrobial resistance and for a national surveillance system to detect and monitor both antimicrobial resistance and the use of antimicrobial products. They also recommended a 25% reduction in the number of antibiotic prescriptions written in Canada.

The World Health Organization is adding an international perspective to the issue, particularly since the enormous increase in international travel means individuals exposed to resistant microbes in one country can easily spread them in other countries. For example, resistant strains of gonorrhoea that originated in Asia and Africa have now spread throughout the world. — *Steven Wharry, CMAJ*