



The new face of health care in Ontario

Ontario's Health Services Restructuring Commission is creating a storm of protest in Ottawa, Toronto and several smaller cities with its sweeping plans to redesign health care delivery. In March the commission recommended the closing of 10 of Toronto's 46 hospitals, including the Wellesley, which special-

izes in treating AIDS patients, and Women's College, which has been a pioneer in women's health issues. That report followed on the heels of the recommendation to close 3 Ottawa hospitals, including the province's only French-language facility.

Operating independently from the government, the commission has the power to order mergers and shut-downs; the public has just over a

month to respond. Although Premier Mike Harris had indicated his government would not be swayed by public protests over closures, there were indications that the plight of the Montfort, Ottawa's French-language hospital, might warrant reconsideration. The recommendation to shut it down even attracted the attention of Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

Toronto physician hopes to be swamped in paperwork

Toronto family physician Eric Silver knows from experience what a headache it is to manage and store stacks of patient records — but he's offering to take on the task for his colleagues.

Silver and an associate have established Record Storage and Retrieval Services (RSRS) to take over the cumbersome tasks of storing patient files and responding to requests for patient information on behalf of retiring and relocating physicians. The service will be free to Ontario physicians.

Ontario's 1991 Medical Act requires that patient records be kept for 2 to 10 years. In some cases records are to be kept for 10 years after a patient reaches the age of majority, leaving an MD responsible for the file for as long as 28 years. "It becomes a mammoth amount of paper," said Silver, a 1987 graduate of the University of Toronto.

He speaks from experience. Silver took over the medical practices and 3000 patient charts of 2 retiring physicians about a year ago and found he had an instant storage problem. He notified all patients by mail that he had taken over the practices, but 20% of the notices were

returned because the addresses were no longer correct. He estimates that he was asked to transfer about 10% of the 3000 patient files. There were enough paperwork requests to warrant having part-time help to keep



up with transfers, authorized requests for records, photocopying and mailing of patient information.

In taking over the practices, Silver also assumed responsibility for their patient files. But what about medical records held by physicians who die, retire or relocate without a successor? "These charts are often kept in attics, boxes, basements and can be a real problem for the estate when a physician dies," said Silver.

Some charts fall into the hands of patients themselves, while others go astray in the mail while being transferred from one physician to another. Most find their way to boxes, dusty basements and oblivion.

"Every physician has this problem," he said. "It would be more cost-effective to have a lot of records in one facility with storage capacity, a high-speed copier, a database and a full-time staff person." Costs would be covered by invoicing patients for this nonmedical service on the basis of the Ontario Medical Association fee schedule.

RSRS will arrange for the pickup, organization, tracking, retrieval, authorized copying and transferral of patient files for Ontario physicians. When legal requirements have been met, records will be shredded. Silver plans to put notices in newspapers, redirect mail and have telephone calls forwarded so that patients requesting information will know whom to contact about their records. Currently RSRS is available only to Ontario doctors, although he hopes to expand the service nationwide. Information is available from Silver or Elan Eisen, 416 486-8788.