

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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URGING POLITICIANS TO THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT HEALTH CARE

Health care is always a hot topic during elections, with good cause. Ontarians have a deep attachment to their public health system, consistently naming it among the top issues of concern in opinion polls. Much attention has been paid to the province's aging population and the impact this could have on government spending; health care already consumes close to 40% of Ontario's budget.

But are we asking candidates the right questions?

Ontario faces a troubling public policy paradox: while funding for health care continues to increase, the health and quality of life of Ontarians is worsening in several important measures. Consider, half of Ontarians are affected by one or more chronic conditions, yet we are partaking in unhealthy behaviours that can lead to those conditions -a paltry 4%of children aged 12-17 are physically active; 52% of Ontarians are either overweight or obese.

Yet, the public discourse around health care remains stubbornly focused on managing responses to illness. When preventative measures are raised, they too are very much within the context of what we think of as traditional health strategies.

There is growing consensus that factors outside the health care system play a pivotal role in influencing one's health -from unaddressed environmental concerns to a shortage of affordable housing, poor urban planning to increasing traffic congestion. These factors influence rates of preventable diseases and injuries, driving up health costs, increasing disparities, and decreasing the economic potential of the province.

We therefore need to shift the way we think -and our governments act -on health care. We can no longer attempt to address health issues in isolation; rather we must take a more holistic approach.

For example, a recently released report by the Medical Officers of Health for Toronto, Peel, Simcoe Muskoka and Hamilton entitled, Improving Health by Design in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area (GTHA) revealed that "improvements in the ways communities are designed and integrate public

transportation would result in the prevention of over 330 premature deaths and over 1,000 cases of diabetes each year across the GTHA."

With the economic burden of diabetes expected to increase 42% over the next decade, why wouldn't governments act on this advice?

Consider also a just-released study prepared by the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute, and the University Ottawa. Among the report's startling findings: four unhealthy behaviours - smoking, poor diet, inactivity, and unhealthy alcohol consumption - accounted for the use of 942,000 hospital bed days at a cost of \$1.8 billion. Ontarians with the lowest family income occupied hospital beds for 171 per cent more days than people with the highest income.

Imagine what can be achieved by policies which promote healthy living and reduce income inequality.

Effective strategies and innovative models are already in place in various communities across Ontario, elsewhere in Canada and beyond; we must learn from them.

The Ontario Public Health Association has put forward a comprehensive plan to reduce public health care costs and improve the health and well-being of Ontarians. A New Approach to Health - Improving the Health and Quality of Life of Ontarians, calls on legislators to:

- Create legislation requiring all ministries and public agencies to assess the health impact of new government policies and investments.

- Support the province-wide expansion of successful community strategies designed to improve health outcomes

- Adopt the Canadian Index of Wellbeing so we have a broader and more informative picture of how Ontario is doing in supporting public health and well-being.

Ontario has built a public health care system that is the envy of many. But there are troubling trends that must be reversed if we are to facilitate a healthier population and reduce government costs.

Improving the health and well-being of Ontarians requires more than a band-aid solution. It requires thoughtful, informed policy, intergovernmental cooperation, and implementation of practical, proven measures. Will Ontario MPPs be bold enough to act?

That may be a good question to ask your local candidates.

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