

March 25, 2020 | **Rural Health Concerns**

*Tune in here for updates on how our community is defending our hospital and healthcare system.*

## **Pandemic Underlines Importance of Local Resources**

If there is a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the evidence that local healthcare resources play a vital role in protecting rural populations. One of the first measures taken by Premier Higgs in response to the outbreak was to withdraw the proposed closing of ERs in Sackville and other small town hospitals for the foreseeable future. The process of consultation leading to a provincial Health Summit in June appears likely to be postponed as well.

Sackville's Community Health Solutions Steering Committee is therefore shifting its primary focus to the support of urgent community measures. Adapting to the challenges of COVID-19 will clearly demonstrate how important the system is at the local level and the critical value of local staff and infrastructure.

At the same time, the search continues for long-term reforms of rural healthcare that can benefit all New Brunswickers. In this regard, the research and data group is gathering information on the economic value of our local hospital and its impact on local health.

## **Mayors Continue to Collaborate**

Following release of their joint communiqué in response to the provincial budget last week (see Newsletter #3), the mayors of small towns with hospitals affected by the proposed changes held another teleconference on March 17<sup>th</sup> to discuss how best to prepare for active engagement with the province on long-term health reform. They stressed the importance of being active participants in the process and not merely observers. Evidence gathered in advance of any consultation will need to reflect not just numbers but real-life experience. Accurate first-hand accounts of how individuals have benefited from ready access to local hospital services will help to build the case for real reforms.

## **Have We Enough Hospital Beds?**

One of the risks of the pandemic is that there may be too little space to accommodate the sick. In New Brunswick that threat is magnified by the fact that more than a quarter of hospital beds have been occupied by patients awaiting admission to nursing homes. Efforts are under way to free up beds for acute care by transferring these people to locations better suited to their needs. The immediate pressure to do so underlines a long-standing delay in the increase of nursing home capacity and home care services — surely a better strategy than using local hospitals as interim holding facilities.

## **Recommended Reading**

On March 21, the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians and the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada issued an urgent press release that illustrates the vital importance of maintaining rural hospitals as a key part of our healthcare system. The opening paragraph reads as follows:

“Canada’s rural population, which includes many Indigenous communities, requires equitable access and care close to their homes. Infrastructure, human resources, geography and weather impact rural medical outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that urban and rural referral sites support each other and act as a unified system of emergency care. It is critical that Canada’s rural Emergency Departments (EDs) remain open and staffed. It is of national interest to avoid unnecessary rural patient transfers to urban and tertiary care centres already at full capacity.”

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Stay well in the coming months, and watch this space for more updates as they become available.

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