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Reduce medical errors to save lives and money: author

'Cutting hospital staff can cost more in long run'

Critics of austerity measures say cutting hospital beds and workers isn't the best way to save money.

It seems counter-intuitive, but they maintain the best way is to open more beds and hire more cleaning staff. It would have the added benefit of preventing some 24,000 Canadians deaths caused by medical errors every year, they add.

The critics stopped by Annprior May 18 on a whirlwind tour of 15 cities and towns, including Ottawa. Their analogy is that of three jumbo jets crashing every week, killing 1,153 people, and how governments would move quickly to solve that problem. But when it comes to medical errors in the health-care system - where 18 per cent of patients are harmed - nothing is done.

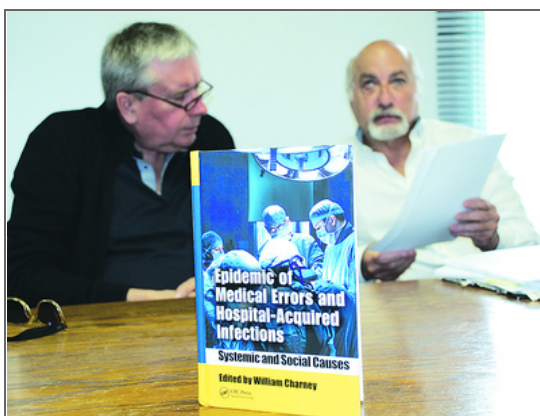
"It's just taken as a string of personal tragedies that happen to individual families that no one links together," said Michael Hurley, president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU). "We tolerate a failure level of one in five in the face of scientific studies that show how we can stop it."

William Charney, editor of the newly released book *Epidemic of Medical Errors and Hospital-Acquired Infections*, said governments have known for 20 years that overcrowding and improper cleaning are costly both in human suffering and tax spending. The book probes the systemic causes of preventable hospital deaths, including unsafe patient volumes, inadequate staffing levels, shift work, health care working conditions, lack of accountability, legal issues that conflict with patient safety issues, and staff training.

Cutting jobs and inefficiencies in many sectors of the economy can improve the bottom line. Health care isn't one of those sectors, Charney explained.

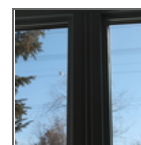
When patients develop bedsores, C. difficile, and other hospital-acquired illnesses, the treatment cost can rise dramatically: anywhere from \$10,000 to \$85,000 in the case of bedsores.

Properly staffed hospitals with nurses to routinely turn patients in the case of bedsores and workers to clean



Health care warning. Michael Hurley, left, and *Epidemic of Medical Errors and Hospital-Acquired Infections* editor William Charney discuss the benefits of investing in nurses and hospital cleaners. Preventing errors and illnesses could save 24,000 Canadians annually and between \$7 and \$10 billion. *Derek Dunn*

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railings and other surfaces, would save tax dollars over the long haul, said Charney.

He said Ontario Health Minister Deb Matthews's approach that could see service and spending freezes is wrong-headed. Canada already spends between \$7 and \$10 billion annually on resolving medical errors and hospital infections. Together they are the second leading cause of death.

"If you really want to go on austerity measures, this is how you do it: Putting money upfront will not only prevent errors and needless deaths, it will save health care dollars, because hospital stays will be shorter and liability costs will go down," said Charney, who has 30 years of experience as a health and safety officer in Canadian and U.S. hospitals. "The minister has it all wrong."

However, the McGuinty Liberal government has a simple message that resonates: cut spending and reduce the \$15-billion deficit. The counter message takes longer to explain, but Hurley and Charney are confident that when Ontarians understand the science, statistics and analysis arguments for increasing healthcare spending, the government will change course.

"Governments need to have the political will to tackle this epidemic and to change the culture of the medical establishment to one of openness and accountability to prevent needless deaths," Charney said. "A motive of cost-cutting in the hospital sector is fueling errors. This includes an obsession with cost-cutting through understaffing nurses and cleaners."

This fall, OCHU will push to have legislation requiring mandatory reporting of medical errors and hospital-acquired infections introduced at Queen's Park.

"The personal suffering this results in is staggering," Hurley said. "But preventable medical errors are going to get worse if the Ontario government cuts hospital budgets and thousands more beds as planned."

"Heightened patient volumes, unsafe bed occupancy rates and reduced cleaning have resulted in an environment that puts patients at risk."

Ontario has the fewest hospital beds per population of any province in Canada.

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