

November 8, 2006

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS AND NURSE PRACTITIONERS BEING ADDED TO HOSPITAL EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

The McGuinty government is investing a total of \$2 million in six pilot projects where physician assistants and nurse practitioners will be deployed to work in hospital emergency departments.

Physician Assistants

Physician Assistant (PA) is an innovative new health care professional role in Ontario and is part of the *HealthForceOntario* health human resources strategy to increase the number of health care professionals working in the province, including doctors and nurses.

Like Physician Assistants in the United States, the Canadian military and Manitoba, Physician Assistants in Ontario will supplement physician services and work under the authority of a supervising licensed physician. The physician will retain overall responsibility for the direction of the Physician Assistant's activities as well as accountability for the health care delivered.

Under direction of a supervising physician, a PA trained by the Canadian military has the skills and experience to deal with medical emergencies as well as routine care needs.

The existing and pending PA education programs in Canada are several years in length. The Canadian Forces Physician Assistant Program is the only formal education program for PA's currently working in Canada. Only those individuals with 10 to 15 years' experience working as a paramedic within the Canadian Forces are selected to take this accredited program which includes 12 months of in-class instruction and 47 weeks of clinical rotations.

The clinical tasks assigned to a Physician Assistant in the emergency department demonstration pilots will depend on the agreement between the specific supervising physician and the PA at that site.

Nurse Practitioners

Nurse practitioners are not new to Ontario. They are health care providers who improve access to high quality health care services for people across the province every day. They are experienced registered nurses with advanced education in either primary health care or a specialized area of acute care service delivery.

The government currently funds over 500 primary health care nurse practitioner positions in the province. These nurse practitioners work in a variety of setting across the province – including Community Health Centres, long-term care homes, public health units, outpatient hospital clinics and emergency departments.

Findings from some of the existing emergency departments employing nurse practitioners suggest that they contribute to positive outcomes, such as reducing the number of patients who leave without being assessed. In some cases, hospitals have set up primary health care nurse practitioner clinics to reduce unnecessary visits to the emergency department.

As part of the emergency department staff, the nurse practitioners will be able to provide a range of care, from primary health care to acutely ill patients. This includes diagnosing, treating, and discharging patients with minor illnesses (ear infections) and injuries (sprains), as well as intervening in more acute / critical situations, such as starting resuscitation measures, or ordering diagnostic tests for patients presenting with more serious complications (chest pain). These services vary depending on whether the nurse practitioners are primary health care or acute care.

These pilot sites will increase the number of nurse practitioners and physicians assistants working as part of emergency department teams, so that more communities can benefit from the positive contributions collaborative teams can offer patients.

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