

October 28, 2020

Health System Breaking Point- Physicians Call for Help

As Emergency Room and Intensive Care Unit Physicians working in the Edmonton zone, we feel obligated to inform you about the worrisome strain on our healthcare system –Edmonton is at a tipping point. Actions taken now will help ensure we can provide the quality care Albertans deserve before there are more unnecessary deaths and illness during this pandemic.

The availability of all hospital beds for patients has declined significantly. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were worried about the number of intensive care beds and breathing machines available, and we still worry; however, we now know the problem is much bigger. Regular hospital beds for medical and surgical patients are also at a critical shortage with entire units closed in Edmonton because of outbreaks. Outbreaks and expanded infection precautions in hospitals and facilities have stalled movement within the hospital and out of hospital. Patients admitted to a hospital with pneumonia or stroke currently have no place to go. This means your loved ones are sitting in the Emergency Department for up to one week before they are moved to a regular bed in the hospital. The end-result of this strain is longer ER wait times, as we have no place to examine patients and provide the care they need and deserve.

Another alarm bell ringing is the rate of healthcare worker burnout. The pandemic has been challenging for everyone, but this has been especially hard on our healthcare staff. We are nearing a crisis due to hundreds of nurse shortages. Re-deployment of a health care worker from one service to another is easier said than done. Unfilled nursing shifts due to COVID-19 exposures, illness, childcare, lack of overtime, budget cuts, and fear are having devastating implications. This has required certain healthcare departments to use mandatory overtime staffing which actually means forcing individuals to work overtime. Individual nurses are running out of steam by working significantly more hours. Morale is low. Depression is high. It is quite possible that patients will not have a nurse assigned to them.

Another major strain on our healthcare system is the provincial government's plan to cut 11,000 AHS positions. This is puzzling considering we are still in the pandemic fight of our lives with no end in sight. We believe most healthcare workers understand that Alberta's economy is struggling, and work needs to be done with the government to ensure our public healthcare system remains economically sustainable. However, this is not the time to be cutting jobs and funding for critical resources. Those 11,000 jobs are healthcare workers who provide services we rely upon for patient care. Government cuts are contributing to a system that is overwhelmed and at a boiling point. We need to be working together to ensure Albertans have timely access to healthcare.

COVID-19 is not the only burden on our system. Mental illness, the destruction of primary care because of recent government changes in combination with the impact of pandemic measures, influenza, and people not going to the doctor or hospital because of fear are all adding to the problem. This pandemic and the healthcare system situation is going to get much worse.

Let's do what we can to protect each other and ensure our public healthcare system stays afloat. Government cutting healthcare and attacking physicians at a time when we desperately need everyone to work together is putting a nail in our coffin. We ask our patients to please understand all healthcare workers are doing our best and you may not be admitted to hospital for issues that you previously would have been. Please thank nurses and cleaning staff for their tremendous work against all odds. We cannot stress enough the importance of public health guidelines with physical distancing, limiting social gatherings, and hand washing. Your safe choices are critical in winning this pandemic war. We, physicians, are here for you. Please help us get through this pandemic.

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