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Health Care Dollars - Where Do They Go?

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I'm sure you have heard about all of the money that Ernie Eves is pumping into the Health Care System with no associated decline in waiting lists or access to care; however, if you add the twist of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), then it seems that our Health Care System might be in need of a financial boost.

Perhaps the Emergency Rooms could borrow some money from the budgeted \$45 million per year to maintain TeleHealth Ontario!

I was curious to find out more about TeleHealth Ontario after hearing about it continuously in the news during the SARS outbreak. My experience included being on hold for forty-five minutes before someone answered the call. When I finally was able to speak to a TeleHealth representative, they indicated that they did not have any statistics about their services; and therefore, I should speak to a representative from the Ministry of health.

Ms. Robertson from the Ministry of Health indicated that the mandate of TeleHealth Ontario was to provide the residents of Ontario with another means of accessing medical information twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Ms. Robinson noted that TeleHealth had Interpretation services in over 110 languages, and services via a TTY line for individuals with a hearing impairment. She indicated that their Registered Nurses provided hands-on information to callers, but no diagnosis would be provided over the phone.

Their system was based on symptom triage. She stressed that TeleHealth was NOT designed as a cost saving venture.

The system was introduced in increments starting with the (416) area code and then each subsequent area code within Ontario, and that over one million people have used TeleHealth since its inception in December of 2001. Ms. Robinson noted that 45% of users of TeleHealth Ontario were repeat callers. Typically the service would receive 4,000 calls per day, but that sky rocketed to 13,000 due to SARS. (I wonder how long these callers were on hold for?!?). Ms. Robertson directed me to the website <http://www.health.gov.on.ca> to obtain more information. I visited the site, which explained when a person should call:

When Should I Call?

When you have a general health question and no where to turn, call Telehealth Ontario. Within minutes your questions will be answered, providing you with peace of mind. It was stressed that this was not an emergency service and did not replace "911". It was advertised that Registered Nurses would help you decide what your medical route should be. For instance, should you go to the Emergency Room (ER), provide self-care, contact your family doctor or possibly go to a Walk-In Clinic (Locations would be provided).

Now all of this sounds great BUT does it work and does it fulfill it's mandate? That seems to be the million or millions dollar question. With an annual operating budget of \$45 million, you would expect the service to be phenomenal. To reassure the residents of Ontario, the date for evaluation is 2005!

It should be noted that Registered Nurses in Ontario are not permitted to provide a diagnosis, and without a diagnosis, how can one recommend a course of treatment?

I spoke with friends, colleagues and Physicians to get their take on the TeleHealth Ontario. Everyone I spoke to had no idea of TeleHealth's annual budget.

I also spoke with a family physician who felt that for questions such as, 'I missed a dose of medication, so do take an extra dose', TeleHealth Ontario was a nice service for his patients; however, when they learned of the operating costs, they were flabbergasted.

I also spoke to a specialist, who was more familiar with TeleHealth Ontario, and they felt that the service was a "dis-service to Ontario Residents," and they would never recommend it to any of their patients. When asked why, they responded "you don't need to be an RN to send someone with a splinter to Emerg!"

I leave you with the question: Is it worth the \$45 million per year given the state our Health Care system?

A Sensible Solution to the Adversarial Process

