

The Death of the Misericordia?

February 24, 2022

The Misericordia Community Hospital is falling over the edge due to underfunded resources including staffing, equipment and functional spaces. This long-term situation has accelerated with a never-ending pandemic and a government waging war on physicians, while simultaneously laying seize to health care workers. We are tired, and the system is falling apart.

We are not the only hospital that can write this story, but we might be the first to fall. The pandemic has increased the demands placed on our system to an unprecedented level. This is not a short-term emergency. Caring for COVID patients is now a regular and ongoing part of healthcare system needs. One would think the next step is planning for increased staffing, equipment and spaces with more funding. Instead, the opposite has happened with physicians leaving.

While the Misericordia is building a new emergency room, this is not enough. It currently sees double the number of patients than it should. There may not be any healthcare workers left when it opens in spring 2023. The staff are burnt out and Alberta is increasingly unfavorable for health care workers. An emergency department cannot operate in silo. Other departments desperately need upgrades. The emergency department still needs other units to send patients to after they are assessed for admission, specialists to consult, procedures to be performed, and a place for patients to go back to in the community with family doctors to look after them. All these services are in crisis too.

Internal Medicine looks after the most complex and sickest patients in the hospital. During wave two most of those physicians worked for a month straight, including long days with evenings and nights, while missing out on Christmas with their families. Family physicians and other specialists came to their aid. Many of us acquired COVID because vaccines were not yet available. Wave three and now wave five (Omicron) are a similar story, however physician loss is ongoing and recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult.

The ICU has been in a “temporary space” for years. This started with 10 beds but only three were in a room with a door. COVID can be transmitted through droplets so the ICU was moved during wave three and again in wave four (Delta). We were ordered not to refuse transfers, even if the patient volume was no longer safe. We were abused by patients. Our standards fell. The ICU space and resources remain unacceptable.

The surgical program is decimated. They shut down with each subsequent wave, these staff have been sent to all other units during the pandemic. Anaesthetists have left for greener pastures. Like other sites, getting to pre-pandemic levels for surgeries and actually sustaining that level is a dream, not a reality, and to address our growing waitlist is more akin to a fairy tale.

The United Conservative Party has been clear and consistent in their messaging of cuts to healthcare. They have attacked physicians in multiple ways: 1) physician pay, starting in October 2019, with unilateral fee code reductions; 2) an Ernst & Young report released in February 2020 intending to cut healthcare by 1.9 billion; 3) delays and unfavorable contracts with hospitalists; and the most remarkable event of all 4) tearing up the physician agreement with the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) in February 2020. We continue to go without an AMA physician agreement. This government ambush shows in our increasing inability to provide care.

The United Nurses of Alberta ratification of a collective agreement on January 27, 2022 is the beginning of what is needed. This is a 4.25 per cent pay increase over four years and one per cent payment for 2021 in recognition of nurses' contributions during the pandemic. This new tone of the government should be applied to other healthcare workers and investing in the system.

Our government has abandoned our community site with their cuts. What is the future of the Misericordia as we adjust to endemic COVID with inadequate resources and workforce? What will happen to us when the new South Edmonton Hospital is built and funds continue to be diverted into new buildings? Currently the Misericordia Community Hospital has physicians and staff who have a strong sense of community and believe in the delivery of high-quality care. The care that we can provide is delivered with compassion and respect and that is something the government cannot cut from us. We will not stop advocating for what is right for our patients.

Dr. Erika MacIntyre, Past-President