

December 6, 2006

Op-Ed or Guest Column

Your Involvement is Key to Improving Local Health Care

With the creation of the North West Local Health Integration Network, residents of Northwestern Ontario can now participate in discussions and decisions about local health care. For the first time, each of us has the opportunity to get involved and help build a health care system that is truly responsive to the unique health needs and challenges of the Northwest.

Local Health Integration Networks, or LHINs, are based on the principle that health care services are best planned, coordinated and funded at the local level, by people who know the needs and priorities of their communities. The North West LHIN is governed by a Board of Directors whose members all live in the Northwest, use the local health care system and are focused on ensuring the best possible health care for all residents of our area.

Our Board is committed to ongoing, meaningful consultation with all our health care partners. This includes the people who use local health services as well as those who provide them. In fact, we are *required* by legislation to engage and involve all local residents and communities on an ongoing basis to ensure that we are addressing their health care needs and priorities.

One example of this is the recent development of our *Integrated Health Services Plan*, which is a significant milestone for the North West LHIN. The *Integrated Health Services Plan* (IHSP) is the first regional, system-wide plan for the delivery of health services in Northwestern Ontario. It will guide the North West LHIN and local health service providers in their efforts to improve the health care system over the next three years.

Community involvement was vital to the development of our *Integrated Health Services Plan*. Health service providers, communities and members of the public were involved through a broad and unprecedented community engagement process. Roundtables, discussion forums and meetings provided opportunities for input from across our region. LHIN Board and staff members traveled some 15,000 kilometers visiting communities across the region to hear

about what is working well in health care and where improvements were needed. In September, the LHIN released its draft IHSP and invited public review and input through a variety of methods, including additional consultation sessions. We thank everyone who provided valuable contributions toward the development of this important health plan for our region.

The *Integrated Health Services Plan* has now been approved by the LHIN Board, and is available on our website at www.northwestlhin.on.ca. This plan pulls together what we heard from people across the region, along with the most current data on our population's health status, existing health services and how we use them. Our next steps are to work with our partners on specific programs and services as well as targets and timelines that are appropriate for each of the priorities identified in our plan. This work is already well under way.

While the *Integrated Health Services Plan* is now complete, your opportunities for involvement do not end here. Your input will be important to the LHIN on an ongoing basis as we move forward with our mandate. Community involvement will be multi-faceted in order to reach everyone, and may include public meetings, the establishment of community roundtables, committees or task forces as well as a variety of other feedback mechanisms. These initiatives will evolve and be refined over time, and we encourage you to get involved in whatever manner you choose.

We also invite you to attend the LHIN's regular Board meetings. Our open Board meetings provide you with the opportunity to see how the LHIN's work is progressing, to observe our decision-making processes and to gain an understanding of the rationale for plans and decisions. We welcome the public to our meetings because we are committed to transparency and accountability in our decision-making. Board meetings will be held in different communities across the region. Meeting notices and details will be posted on the LHIN's website and advertised in local newspapers.

As we have met with people across our region, a common theme that we have communicated is that "we are all in this together". The mandate of the LHIN is to improve the quality and accessibility of health care for all residents of Northwestern Ontario through better coordination of health services. The only way we will succeed is by working together with all of our health care partners. We can't do it alone. We need your help and your expertise as we move forward. I encourage you to get involved so that our local health system meets *your* needs.

John Whitfield is the Chair of the North West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN). The LHIN is a non-profit organization designed to plan, coordinate and fund health services in Northwestern Ontario, including hospitals, community care access centre, home care, long-term care, community health centres, community support services and mental health and addiction services.