

Health Reform: Dr. Melanson is right on!

On Tuesday, June 25, Dr. Serge Melanson, President of the NB Medical Society, re-iterated the call for an all-party approach to health care reform as had earlier been referenced by the Leader of the Green Party, David Coon. And in that call lies the wisdom that is required to effect meaningful change and modernization in the NB Health System. This system is too important, too sacred, and too complicated for the instability caused by a succession of one term governments as we have had now for over 20 years.

The approach to true reform of primary care, for instance, cannot be relegated to debate in the legislature in which politicians, for purely partisan reasons, seek to undermine otherwise perfectly good ideas. It is a complex piece of business that requires serious reflection and re-alignment of positions and interests. Some of these are simply entrenched in tradition; some are rooted in legitimate professional practice concerns.

Review of evidence, best practices, and negotiation of new relationships is not best done in the glare of cameras or in an environment heated by an up-coming election. On the contrary, the process of reform requires that people of good will come together in an atmosphere of trust and true collegiality to share and negotiate visions.

In the process, it is important that the players thoroughly understand all that has happened to get health care to its current position.

Recent publicity have placed focus on the apparent growth in violence against nurses, and appropriately so. Nurses fill an honored position in society and deserve respect and support.

But why are we hearing so much about this tragic situation now? Well, it is not really a new problem but it is getting worse for many reasons. So before more serious conflict is experienced, steps must be taken.

Years ago violence by patients, when experienced, was normally met with the appearance of a Nursing Orderly. Usually these were men, oftentimes young and athletic, and they were able to de-escalate situations while staff called police if necessary. Occasionally, a straight jacket would be employed to ensure that the unruly character did not cause further harm to himself or others.

Both orderlies and straightjackets have long since gone leaving nurses resorting to Commissionaires or other security personnel. Normally, in Emergency Departments there has been a hotline to police but that normally requires a few minutes for physical response.

Many years ago, some hospitals in metropolitan cities in the US became accustomed to having armed guards or armed police officers present at the Emergency Department door. In those cases, the mere

Ken McGeorge, BS,DHA,CHE is a career health care executive and now consulting, based in Fredericton, NB, Canada. Please visit www.KenMcGeorge.com to learn more.

presence of an armed officer scanning those who entered was a real deterrent. But probably New Brunswick is not ready to escalate to that level at this point.

The causes of such violence are numerous but predictable to those attentive to what is happening in our society. A review of articles highlighted on the internet show that 79.1 per cent of abuse was caused by persons with cognitive dysfunction. That would not be surprising particularly with the demographic shifts and the growth of dementia-related illness. The next leading cause, equally predictable, is substance abuse. With the growth of use of intoxicants, drugs of all forms, both illicit and abuse of prescription drugs, this would not be any surprise. This is a factor at a time when one hears of strange patterns of violence, theft, and other crime in our society.

Then there is anger related to a patient's condition. When people have experienced long waits for access and service, or when the treatment they expected does not yield the result anticipated, anger can quickly take over. With the anger, the nurse can be the innocent object simply because he/she is there and visible, perhaps delivering news the family did not want to hear.

Then occasionally the anger has its roots in domestic challenges such as a broken or strained marriage or other factors not even related such as overwhelming debt or job loss. This has been a factor in many altercations in health care, some even involving weapons.

So what is the solution? Do we teach nurses martial arts? Equip them with pepper spray? Other radical ideas? Nurses are professionals trained to deal with illness and should not work in an atmosphere of fear. The basic stress of the job is tough enough.

It probably is time for the visible presence of armed officers making their presence well known. I don't like it but the alternative is not a pretty one.

If somehow we could see a drastic reduction in drug abuse, that would help...but not likely to happen. If we could deal more proactively with Dementia-like symptoms, that could help and that is do-able.