

Arden Krystal leads Southlake in a time of increasing growth and demand



By Brock Weir

Not many people get a crash course on their new workplace while standing in line for a new license plate, but that's exactly what Arden Krystal received this fall when she mentioned Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Ms. Krystal, who comes to Southlake from British Columbia with over 30 years of experience in the public health sector, took over as President and CEO of the hospital this past October.

Evidently, it's a hospital whose reputation precedes it. While waiting in line to get her plates, she said she had a 10 minute talk about the hospital, its programs, and the warm feelings the clerk had towards the organization. But, that being said, she is coming into a hospital facing an increase on demand due to growth and, in turn, there are some areas feeling what she describes as a "strain." "It is evident when you walk through the hallways and through the Emergency Department and see the kinds of volumes staff are contending with," she says. "Like other Emergencies across Canada, it is primarily related to new populations as well as our aging population. As people age, their number of chronic diseases goes up and their need for health services goes up. It is really in the medical areas in particular where we're noticing a kind of strain."

With a few months at the helm now under her belt, Ms. Krystal says she has been spearheading ongoing discussions with the hospital board, Southlake's executive team, and several members of staff in town halls to get an idea of the "needs and wants" within the Southlake community.

Although she says the Ministry of Health & Long Term Care has a "patients first" mandate, she says she uses a different approach to

achieve those ends.

“For me, it is not about who is first or second, but how to we create the best patient experience possible,” she says. “For me, the way we do that is making sure staff have the environment they need to essentially be happy at work. It means removing barriers to them doing their best work. It means supporting them through education and training. It means giving them the resources they need to do their jobs, like the right equipment. There are a lot of things I think we have an opportunity to do. That is the work I have done in my past and I think I can make a bit of an imprint here at Southlake.

“[Another focus], from a mid- to long-term perspective is really helping Southlake plan for the inevitable growth that will occur over time and needs to occur over time. That is through things like embarking on a new Five-Year Strategic Plan as well as starting some master site planning. It is obviously very important to think ahead around where our space needs will be and be really well positioned to move forward with these things when needed.”

Ms. Krystal came to Southlake as a resident of Vancouver. There was some “head scratching” when she came on board at Southlake, she says, with people asking her what she knew not only about northern York Region and south Simcoe, but the needs of the local community.

Yet, she says, she grew up in Abbotsford, a community not dissimilar to those which Southlake serves.

In both locales, there is a commitment from the community to its local hospital and this commitment, in turn, is returned. Both are communities needing an increased focus on mental health services and increased rates of homelessness, people looking to retire in place or downsizing from the big city to a smaller town lifestyle, as well as young families setting up their first homes.

“People move out and young families move out because they can't afford to live in the city and that means you really have to check out services for babies, children and young families “ and that includes primary care,” says Ms. Krystal. “You have to make sure also, because you have a big retirement group, that there are services for near the end of people's lives as well. It is bimodal distribution in some ways and that is pretty typical of both small towns and towns like this that are growing quite fast.

“What I see in the community are these building pressures that really impact the health care system and that is where a lot of engagement from the community [will come in]. Healthcare internationally is really changing in a big way to become much more attuned to patient participation, not only participation in their own health care, but also their participation in planning the way services should be delivered and grown.

“One of the things I will be doing differently at Southlake is, as we embark on our five year plan, going out to various places in the community to engage members on the kinds of services they would like to see us build and grow. I am very appreciative of the warm welcome I have received but it is very apparent to me how proud people are of the organization and how committed they are to making it successful.

“Like every organization, there are challenges from time to time but I feel really confident with the continued support of our community we're going to make Southlake even better.”