

Mental health crunch to be tackled with \$8.7 million investment in Southlake



By Brock Weir

It has been a matter of keeping patients safe, healthy and offering them the right support.

This is the challenge Dr. Gaurav Mehta and his team at Southlake Regional Health Centre have been addressing while grappling with an overflow of patients seeking mental health treatment.

“There have been five or six patients in a very small room, and patients often want to discharge themselves without getting the right help, said Southlake medical director.

But “relief” is on the way.

Provisions for more mental health beds at the local hospital received the loudest cheer on Friday as Dr. Helena Jaczek, Ontario's Minister of Health, announced an \$8.7 million investment in the local hospital, part of an \$822 million investment for Ontario hospitals recently announced in the Provincial budget.

The \$8.7 million investment represents a 3.4 per cent increase in overall Provincial funding for Southlake and will translate to, among other advancements, 12 new adult mental health beds.

“It is a relief,” said Dr. Mehta at Friday's announcement. “It will help us provide a much better quality of care to our patients.”

Dr. Jaczek knows these needs firsthand. The Southlake Family Health Team, she said, is her own family health team and, at Southlake, she has found a hospital that “exudes that sense of caring.”

“Yesterday, the Premier announced a major investment in hospitals across Ontario to the tune of \$822 million for this year,” she said. “This investment is part of our upcoming budget because we know hospitals in our province need our support right now and families are under pressure. Our government believes it is our responsibility to do things that people cannot do for themselves and that includes giving families the care and support they need.

“We have reached out to ensure that we get the very best information as to what the needs are, working with our LHINs (Local Health Integration Networks) to make sure we put the right resources into each community. Some bureaucrat down at the Ministry of Health didn't suddenly come up with \$822 million for the province. It was a really well thought out consultation. In our view, we need to continue this conversation with our council, with the representation we have, so we can look each year at the individual needs. This may cause a little anxiety sometimes when you want to look ahead and plan a little bit more long-term, but we want to have that ongoing conversation and we want it to be very tailored to individual community needs.”

Details of Friday's investment were fleshed out further by MPP Chris Ballard who said, in addition to the 12 new adult mental health beds, the investment will allow for 144 cataract surgeries, 22 hip and knee replacements, and more than 300 MRI hours for at-risk patients to support the hospital's emergency department.

“It is astonishing to me when I think about Southlake and think about the fact it serves a catchment area of over a million people and growing,” he said. “110,000 visits to the emergency department, 30,000 in-patient admissions and over half a million outpatient visits each year; I don't have to tell you how that strains the resources. It is a real testament to the dedication and the abilities of staff, leadership and volunteers because we certainly can't forget the volunteers.”

Following the announcement, Arden Krystal, President and CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre, said she was left with a ?permasmile.?

?There were a lot of people really interested in what was going to be said here today and I think we have some very happy people in the room,? she said. ?I want to thank you both for recognizing the vital role Southlake plays in the lives of almost 1.5 million in York Region and Simcoe County and it keeps growing and keeps growing. Today's announcement helps ease the pressures we're facing as we care for a growing and aging population.

?We are especially pleased to receive funding for the expansion of our in-patient mental health unit. The twelve additional beds that will be added as part of this expansion are desperately needed and will create a lifeline for almost 500 more patients a year. Our in-patient mental health unit is at 114 per cent capacity today and we have seven patients waiting for admission in our emerg. This helps not only those working in our in-patient mental health but also in our emergency area that is very, very congested.

?It can be hard to understand the suffering of patients with mental illness. You can't see it, but they feel it. They come to us in crisis and recently Shelley (name changed) speaks of the courage it took her to even tell our emergency nurse her thoughts of self harm because she felt so much shame. When Shelley is in our in-patient unit, she is welcomed. She is welcomed by our compassionate staff, she is given compassionate and wonderful clinical care, but the environment she needs to come to, while filled with dedicated and caring staff, hasn't been as therapeutic as we would like. It has been overcrowded and it has been chaotic despite everybody's best efforts. This announcement will help us enhance our space to ensure even warmer, safer and better experiences for our patients and people like Shelley.?