

Ontario reducing wait times for surgeries and procedures amid privatization concerns

The Ontario government has announced it is going to make it easier and faster for people to access the publicly-funded surgeries and procedures they need by further leveraging community surgical and diagnostic centres to eliminate surgical backlogs and reduce wait times.

The announcement said the government will significantly expand the number of surgeries being done through community surgical and diagnostic centres and do so with measures in place to protect the stability of health human resources at public hospitals, including requiring new facilities to provide detailed staffing plans as part of their application and requiring a number of physicians at these centres to have active privileges at local hospitals.

?When it comes to your health, the status quo is no longer acceptable,? said Ontario Premier Doug Ford. ?Our government is taking bold action to reduce wait times for surgeries, all while ensuring Ontarians use their OHIP card to get the care they need, never their credit card.?

Community surgical and diagnostic centres have been partners in responding to the pandemic and addressing the pandemic-related backlog in surgeries. The announcement said increasing community delivery of surgeries has proven to increase patient and provider satisfaction and reduces the risk of a rescheduled appointment.

Surgeries performed at these centres will be publicly funded.

The process will be to use a three-step plan that integrates and uses state-of-the-art facilities to speed up how quickly people are able to get surgeries and procedures using their health care.

With cataract surgeries currently having one of the longest wait times for procedures, new partnerships with community surgical and diagnostic centres in Windsor, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Ottawa, will add 14,000 additional cataract surgeries that will be performed each year. These centres will perform the additional 14,000 surgeries with existing health human resources.

To further reduce wait times, the government is expanding the scope of community surgical and diagnostic centres to address regional needs with a continued focus on cataracts as well as MRI and CT imaging and colonoscopy and endoscopy procedures. Beginning in 2023, these procedures will be non-urgent, low-risk, and minimally invasive and in addition to shortened wait times, will allow hospitals to focus their efforts and resources on more complex and high-risk surgeries.

Since early detection and diagnosis of a health issue has a benefit on a patient's quality of life, prognosis, and treatment, the government will introduce legislation in February, that will, if passed, allow existing community diagnostic centres to conduct more MRI and CT scanning so people can access publicly funded diagnostic services faster and closer to home. The next step will also expand surgeries for hip and knee replacements.

As the province expands the role of community surgical and diagnostic centres, Ontario Health and the Ministry of Health will continue to work with system partners and clinical experts to put in place the highest standards of quality and safety.

?Timely and convenient access to surgery and diagnostic imaging is critical to keeping people healthy,? said Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. ?This plan will boost the availability of publicly funded health services in Ontario, ensuring that Ontarians currently waiting for specialized surgeries will have greater access to the world class care they need, where and when they need it.?

As wait times are shortened, Ontario Health must ensure that these centres are included in regional health system planning. Funding agreements with new community surgical and diagnostic centres will require these facilities to work with local public hospitals to

ensure health system integration and linkages, including connection and reporting into the province's wait times information system.

Community surgical and diagnostic centres will also coordinate with local public hospitals to accept patients that are being referred, ensuring people get the surgery they need as quickly as possible.

?Our government's three-step expansion of community surgical and diagnostic centres will bolster the availability of publicly funded health services in Ontario, get us a step closer to getting rid of the current backlogs and reduce wait times,? said Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, who also serves as Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health.

?The Premier, Minister of Health, and our government have been clear: Ontarians will continue to use their health card to access health care. The simple fact is the status quo is no longer working. There are over 200,000 people currently waiting for surgeries, and we have been dealing with backlogs and longer wait times since well before the pandemic. Creative and bold solutions are needed to provide the level of service Ontarians deserve and that includes continuing to pay for these services with an OHIP card. There are over 900 community surgical and diagnostic centres across Ontario, that already offer publicly funded services and have done for decades. Governments of all stripes have issued and renewed licenses for these community surgical and diagnostic centres. This expansion just enables these facilities and new ones to take the level of care to the next level.

?Lastly, this idea isn't new to Canada. Other provinces, including Alberta, B.C, and Saskatchewan have adopted similar community-based models for surgeries and diagnostics with great success. As this initial rollout unfolds in the next several months, our government will soon be looking at putting out RFPs for additional facilities across the province.?

Added Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa over social media, ?Ontarians have been clear that the status quo for our healthcare system is unacceptable. Our government is working to provide greater accessibility to and availability of publicly-funded surgeries and procedures for everyone who uses our public health system.?

Not everyone, however, shares the same enthusiasm for the changes.

The Ontario Health Coalition has described them as a ?fatal threat? to public hospitals.

?What Ford announced today is a fatal threat to our public health care system,? said Natalie Mehra, Executive Director of the Ontario Health Coalition in a statement. ?If they turn over a significant portion of our public hospitals' surgeries to for-profits, we will not be able to protect patients against extra charges of thousands of dollars for needed care and from manipulative extra upselling. The fact is that no one has been able to control the private for-profit clinics where they have sprung up in Canada, and Ontario has done a particularly terrible job of controlling for-profit health care companies in long-term care and other sectors.?

?Already, the existing for-profit clinics in Ontario are charging patients thousands of dollars for surgeries,? Mehra claimed. ?They routinely upsell medically unneeded services to elderly patients. They pressure and manipulate patients into paying hundreds or thousands of dollars that they should never have to pay in our public health system.?

There are currently 206,000 people estimated to be waiting for surgical procedures in Ontario.

Community surgical and diagnostic centres licensed under the independent Health Facilities Act, currently perform around 26,000 OPIP insured surgeries and procedures annually.

By Brian Lockhart&Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter