



Cultural awareness would help doctors treat their patients

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The need for culturally sensitive health care and to address health provider shortages in Ontario were among the key points raised during the Ontario Health Quality Council's (OHQC) recent roundtable discussion in Brampton.

Local residents, physicians, community representatives and OHQC members attended the forum, with the purpose of going over the OHQC's first yearly report on provincial healthcare released earlier this year.

The findings of the report suggested Ontario's health care system was performing well relative to others across Canada. However, it also found accessibility to proper health care by the ethno cultural population was a major shortcoming in the current operation of the healthcare system.

"We want to understand why that is, and to find out how the province can do better," said Ray Hession, chair of the OHQC.

The council listened as participants shared personal experiences; with much of the discussion focused on the barriers the ethno cultural population face in trying to access healthcare.

"In terms of both treatment and access to health information, both difference of culture and language have proven to be difficult barriers to overcome," said council member Zulfikarali Kassamali.

Participants shared the sentiment and made suggestions to better educate the ethno cultural community with health information as well as providing the tools needed to help them and their communities lead healthy lifestyles.

At the same time, they felt health care providers should take more interest in understanding cultural differences when treating their patients.

Among the more vocal proponents for this approach was Jessie Kular, wife of local MPP Dr. Kuldip Kular.

A local nutritionist, Kular acknowledged it was hard for residents new to the country to approach their health provider because either they are unfamiliar with the way the health care system works or they have trouble understanding what the health care provider needs of them to get better. But she went further to suggest doctors don't know enough about various cultures-- the people, language or food.

One example she gave involved a person suffering from diabetes.

"The person is diagnosed, treated but fails to follow the diet because they aren't familiar with the food they are expected to eat. So they go on eating what got them into trouble in the first place," she said.

She felt in such instances, health providers could become more aware of healthy foods that apply to different cultures, thus increasing the success rate of treatments.

While understanding the cultural needs of different communities was the primary issue tabled, another issue brought up was the province's current healthcare provider shortage.

Several participants voiced their displeasure that doctors coming from overseas are still not being utilized because their credentials are not recognized in Ontario. They argued accepting these health providers would address the growing need for better representation of ethno cultural communities in the profession.

Kassamali responded that a day when foreign doctors would be used might be on the horizon.

Bill 124 2006, an act to provide for fair registration practice in Ontario's regulated professions currently is in its first reading. It has the potential to allow foreign-trained doctors to work as assistants.

"If we use these doctors, Ontario patients will have better access to doctors in their own communities, health provider shortages would be addressed and perhaps it will give the health care system the means to overcome cultural barriers," said Kassamali.

He added that, despite the process taking time, the fact it's in its first steps is encouraging.

Overall, OHQC chair Hession was pleased with the discussions that took place.

"I think this meeting is highly valuable and very relevant. It's obvious from today's discussion that while everyone recognizes the strengths of Ontario's health care system there is room for improvement," he said.

The findings of these discussions will be published in March 2007, while its first report is available online at www.ohqc.ca/en/index.asp