

Act on chronic diseases to avoid 'crisis': Report

Says cost of treating diabetes, obesity, heart disease gobbling health-care funds

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Ontario must put the same effort into improving care of people with chronic diseases as it has into easing hospital wait times to stop treatment costs from skyrocketing, says the Ontario **Health Quality Council**.

With at least 60 per cent of health costs going to patients with such chronic problems as diabetes — and the number of diabetics rising by 50,000 a year in Ontario — the dangers of not acting are staggering, the council warns.

The council was created by the Ontario government in September 2005 as an independent body to monitor the province's health-care system and report to the public on its performance.

"We need to start dealing with this challenge urgently, decisively and effectively before it be-

comes a full-blown crisis," said council chair **Ray Hession**, noting that one in three Ontarians has a form of chronic illness.

Costs of treating people with chronic disease, such as obesity, heart problems, arthritis and asthma, will grow as baby boomers age, Hession added as he presented the council's second annual report.

"Chronic disease in Ontario is the budget-eating disease confronting the health system. . . . This is an inconvenient truth."

Keeping better tabs on such patients can keep medical complications down and keep them out of hospital, said the 93-page report.

In one example, it noted that between 2002 and 2004, just over 7 per cent of heart attack victims in Ontario required re-

admission to hospital, compared with 4.8 per cent in Alberta.

About 80 per cent of people over 65 have at least one chronic disease and health already accounts for 46 per cent of every dollar the government spends on programs.

One challenge is that many of the chronic diseases arise from obesity and "progress is not being made" on lowering obesity levels, but the good news is that many of the chronic illnesses are preventable to some degree through healthier lifestyles, Hession said.

Statistics suggest 15 per cent of Ontarians over 18 are obese and one-third of them are overweight.

In a more perfect world, about 2,900 hospital beds — the equivalent of three large hospitals —

could be freed up if the majority of type 2 diabetes cases, lung cancer, heart cases and chronic lung problems were prevented, Hession said.

Efforts by the government a couple of years ago to pay doctors higher incentives for more closely managing patients with diabetes and other chronic diseases are "important" but not enough to improve care levels, he added. "We obviously have, yet, a long way to go in executing an effective chronic disease management strategy."

Another problem is that Ontario doesn't have electronic health records for patients, which would allow doctors to more easily track patients with chronic diseases and the medicines they take, Hession said.

