

One in three residents fighting chronic disease

TORONTO (CP) — One in three Ontario residents is fighting a chronic disease and the government must act urgently before it has a “full-blown crisis” on its hands, the chairman of the Ontario **Health Quality Council** said Monday.

In releasing the council’s annual report on the state of health care, **Ray Hession** said chronic disease continues to be a huge burden on resources and should be government’s No. 1 priority.

“We need to start dealing with this challenge urgently, decisively and effectively,” Hession said. “Chronic diseases in Ontario is the budget-eating disease confronting the health system.”

Even though at least 60 per cent of total health-care costs are already associated with chronic diseases, the council said the government has to pay even more attention to ailments such as asthma, arthritis, diabetes and heart problems.

With an aging population increasingly stressing the system, action needs to be taken now to fight conditions that are often preventable or treatable, Hession said.

“In the context of health care, this is an inconvenient truth,” Hession said, a reference to the documentary chronicling former U.S. vice-president Al Gore’s campaign against global warming.

Almost four in five Ontario residents over the age of 65 have at least one chronic disease, and of those, 70 per cent suffer from two or more conditions.

Hession said obesity is fuelling the rise of many diseases.

Getting people to eat better and stay active, and giving them safe and meaningful work in a healthy environment, could prevent 80 per cent of coronary heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, and over 85 per cent of lung cancer cases, he said.

“This is the rough equivalent of the number of beds found in the three largest acute-care hospitals in Ontario.”

“We know some of the nutritional patterns of some of our young people are not the best they could be and if we could at least be ensuring that schools ... are providing nutritious food that would probably go a long way to changing their eating habits at home as well,” she said.

“That slowness is hard to explain, but it’s a reality.”

Smitherman said the government has done “foundational work” on electronic health records and over four or five years it will be one of the top priorities.

The council also said the government should give more attention to “startling” rates of chronic disease among the low-income, aboriginal and immigrant populations, which are more likely to suffer from disease than average.

On the plus side, Hession noted increased access to five services highlighted in Ontario’s wait-time strategy.

And the launch of 359 telemedicine centres — which use computers and video links to set up long-distance “virtual” appointments — has given better access to advice and treatment in communities not well served by specialists.

The inset image shows a newspaper page with a prominent headline: "Vendors should be banned from playing". Below the headline, there is a photograph of a person, possibly a musician or performer, and some text. The page appears to be from a news outlet, with various columns of text and a small graphic.