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Ontario Health Quality Council CEO Dr. Ben Chan prepares his laptop for a presentation Wednesday in Thunder Bay.

Medical challenge

Reducing wait times for care eyed

BY JIM KELLY
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Access to a family doctor is a major challenge for the 400,000 people in Ontario who don't have one, says the chief executive officer of the Ontario Health Quality Council.

"Making sure we have the right number and mix of people is important," Dr. Ben Chan said Wednesday in an interview at Thunder Bay's St. Joseph's Heritage.

"Right now we're working with family health teams to do modifications of their scheduling systems and how they can manage the inflow of patients," he said.

"And how they design their visits so patients go through their offices more efficiently.

"We found that other jurisdictions who have done this have been able to bring their wait times down to almost nothing," Chan said.

He said the number of people without a family doctor has to come down.

"There are certain things that have to happen in the health care system for that to happen, such as better teamwork and better co-ordination of care," he said.

"And through that we can start addressing this problem."

Chan said the government has increased spaces in medical schools and is accrediting more foreign physicians.

"But it takes time for those changes to be implemented," he said.

The council monitors the state of health care in Ontario and reports any progress to the Ministry of Health.

The last yearly report showed Ontario is failing to meet the chronic disease challenge and that about 8,000 more lives could be saved each year.

The good news is that wait times are down for cataract surgery, knee and hip replacements, and cancer surgery, and telemedicine has helped people in remote regions get access to specialty care without having to leave their community.

Chan said the decrease in wait times for certain procedures is "the efforts of a lot of people dedicated to the health care system."

But he cautioned that more needs to be done. An example is the long wait times for an MRI exam which is a province-wide problem.

"We need to be asking ourselves some questions," Chan said.

"Why these tests are being done and we have to make sure they're being done for all the right reasons.

"We have to tackle these problems head-on," he said.

North West Local Health Integration Network chief executive officer Gwen Dubois-Wing said the exploratory session with Chan was informative.

"We learned about the work the council is doing," she said.

"We also looked at how the LHIN and all our health service providers could work together to determine how we can improve the quality of health care within our area," Dubois-Wing said.