

Behind the Front Lines

A recap/critical look at health care news and the reality behind the reporting from the viewpoint of front-line Ontario registered nurses

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Three Things You'll Learn in This Issue:

1. **RNs Yield More Power Than They Know** – [go](#)
2. **Home Care Mess as Bad as We Thought** – [go](#)
3. **Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital Coverage Unveils Nuggets** – [go](#)

New Report says Medicare is Sustainable

A new report written by two of Canada's leading health and economic experts – Hugh Mackenzie and Michael Rachlis – looks at the sustainability of Canada's health care system ([source](#)) and smashes many of the myths Canadian media have about the system.

Commissioned by the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, the report shows that public health care is sustainable, and that we need to build capacity for public health care programs, primary health care and support programs like home care, long-term care and Pharmacare.

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The Media Loves ONA's New Ad Campaign



ONA's new campaign features transit shelter ads like this one in Toronto.

"Valuing the invaluable" is the theme of a new ad campaign launched by ONA in November. It has received rave reviews from ONA members – and the media.

The campaign features a sports theme and a tag line that reads, "If only registered nurses were valued the way pro athletes are" and notes that dollar for dollar, they're the best value in the health care system.

Following the campaign launch, earned media was quick and positive. Journalists from mainstream media like the *CBC* and *Toronto Sun* as well as marketing media, the public and

ONA members have all expressed delight with the message and its delivery as radio ads began airing in targeted cities across the province, and transit shelter and on-line ads rolled out.

The 'Voice of the Maple Leafs' Joe Bowen is featured on the radio ads ([listen to the ads](#)).

Toronto Sun columnist Ted Woloshyn is among those in the media who wrote about the campaign ([source](#)) in glowing terms.

Woloshyn describes the campaign as "clever" and writes about the challenges for RNs in Ontario. He notes the worsening of the nursing shortage, the impact on nursing students who will experience difficulty finding a full-time job here when they graduate, and the fact that despite the shortage, Ontario hospital's have cut 2,400 RN positions over the past year.

Woloshyn liked the campaign so much he aired the commercials on his CFRB talk show and offered his support to the nurses – a much-needed and

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What is ONA?

The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) is the union representing 55,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals and more than 12,000 nursing student affiliates providing care in hospitals, long-term care facilities, public health, the community, clinics and industry.



Who is Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN?

ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN (pictured), is a veteran renal transplant nurse who is an expert spokesperson on a range of issues. Linda is available to comment on everything from workplace violence, patient care, health care policy in Ontario, the flu pandemic, nursing cuts, public health and much more. Simply contact ONA's media relations officer, Sheree Bond, at (416) 964-8833, ext. 2430 if you would like to interview Linda on a health-related issue.

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The Media Loves ONA's New Ad Campaign

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appreciated gesture during what has turned out to be a difficult year for RNs.

As ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud has noted, we know and research has proven that RNs are the best value for the health care system.

Ontario has seen a great deal of debate about the future of our health care system, with a strong focus on value for money. As our health care leaders continue to look to stretch scarce health care funding dollars further, they simply can't afford to ignore the fact that our nurses provide the best quality of care and have a large impact on patient outcomes. RNs understand the system and have the skills and expertise to ensure that patients receive the care they need.

Members who attended ONA's recent Biennial Convention got a sneak peek at the campaign. The nurses entered the meeting room via a red carpet, complete with autograph seekers and cameramen, in an effort to remind them of the value they bring to the system ([short video](#)).

"For way too long, our members have seen their profession portrayed by health care leaders as simply another expenditure on a spreadsheet. They've seen patient care threatened as thousands of their colleagues' positions were cut to balance budgets," says Haslam-Stroud.

"This campaign celebrates the skills, leadership and knowledge that nurses bring to health care and recognizes them as the health care leaders they truly are."

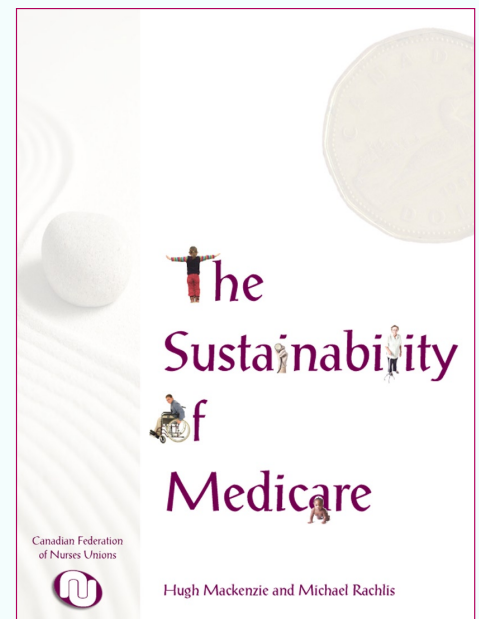
New Report Says Medicare is Sustainable, *cont'd*

CFNU President Linda Silas, RN, notes that Canadians must realize that tax cuts are not a "gift" or a bonus that comes without consequences. The report finds that existing pressures on the health care system have been created by tax cuts, not by increasing health care costs.

The examination of the economics of health care shows that the "cost crisis" that politicians and the media are focused on does not exist. As the report says, "the assertion that Medicare in its current form is not

sustainable has come to be so broadly accepted that it is treated as a kind of received wisdom – yet it is patently untrue."

The report is full of fascinating and useful financial data and information.



THE GOOD NEWS

Nurses Are More All-Powerful Than They Know

Adam Radwanski has written a *Globe and Mail* column ([source](#)) that says the Ontario Nurses' Association is giving the Ontario government "labour pains."

Writing about the disaster that the Liberals' public-sector wage freeze campaign is becoming, Radwanski expresses his theory that Premier Dalton McGuinty was reluctant to impose wage freeze legislation on public-sector workers because of the high "stature" held by nurses.

ONA members are likely taken aback by the power that Mr. Radwanski's column says that they wield. Nurses' experiences in the past year have included:

- round after round of RN position cuts (totaling 2,450) with an accompanying media release from their hospital CEOs saying the deleted positions will have no impact on patient care;
- front-page coverage of triage nurses missing the seriousness of half of ER patients' conditions ([source](#));
- being accused of protecting their turf when expressing concern for the safety of patients in Sault Area Hospital's hemodialysis unit ([source](#)).

Radwanski writes that the Liberals can't afford to award any pay raises to nurses.

ONA continues to believe that the Liberals can't afford to carry through with the \$2.4 billion in corporate tax cuts it plans to institute in the upcoming budget.

THE BAD NEWS

Registered Nurses Attacked in *Sault Star* Opinion Columns

As the date approaches for the start of an "Independent Assessment Committee" hearing that will examine whether RN staffing levels are adequate in the Sault, a series of opinion columns ([source-1](#), [source-2](#), [source-3](#)), in the *Sault Star* has accused RNs of many negative things.

Doug Millroy, editor emeritus of the *Sault Star*, has been engaged in almost a "war of words" with registered nurses at Sault Area Hospital and with ONA, their union.

The opinion columns accuse the RNs in the hospital's hemodialysis unit, by calling for the hearing, of simply protecting their turf. RNs, who possess the education and skills to care for complex, unstable and high-risk patients, are increasingly being replaced by RPNs who are trained to care for less-complex, stable and low-risk patients. RNs say they are concerned with a decline in patient care due to the complexity of the patients in this unit.

In Millroy's opinion, ONA members likely won't see a "favourable" decision from the Committee and he predicts they'll go to arbitration – that's an impossibility, as the IAC has nothing to do with labour relations and everything to do with RNs ensuring that patients receive the care they need.

Millroy's other accusations: RNs aren't team players, other hospitals are replacing RNs with RPNs so it must be okay, and the RNs are failing to provide examples when they talk about risks to patients.

Behind the Front Lines will follow this story and report when the Independent Assessment Committee issues its findings.

THE GOOD NEWS

Home Care Featured in Auditor-General's Report

Bob Hepburn's wonderful column in *The Toronto Star* ([source](#)) calls the findings on home care in the Auditor-General's report a "wake-up call" for Premier McGuinty.

Hepburn writes that the report shows "disturbing evidence" that taxpayers aren't getting value for their money in home care, and he writes about the "waste and mismanagement" at government agencies and ministries.

The column points out that the report "validates" what health care professionals – such as the members of ONA – have been saying for a long time: the home care and community care system is a province-wide nightmare.

As in so many other sectors, inadequate funding has led to CCAC wait lists growing and our members knowing of the suffering of patients who need care but can't access it.

The Auditor-General's report showed that 11 of the 14 provincial CCACs have more than 10,000 people waiting for services.

What should be a major concern for Ontarians is that as hospital care is now provided in the community, inadequate funding and numbers of nurses are in place to provide the care required, as CCACs scramble to balance their budgets.

From ONA's perspective, another difficulty for this sector is the reintroduction of the competitive bidding system for home care contracts. The spectre of RNs working for private agencies who can regularly lose their contracts, meaning the RNs are laid off every few years, has discouraged these professionals from wanting to work in home care.

Triage Nurses the Focus of Media Coverage of Auditor General's Report

The Ontario Auditor-General's report generated many headlines, but one of the most prevalent was regarding triage nurses and their rate of accurately assessing patients in the province's emergency departments ([source](#)).

Of all the findings in the report, the fact that the auditor found that about half of the assessments performed by ER triage nurses missed something was the most intriguing for ONA.

As the government's ER Wait Times Targets continue to be the focus for many hospital administrators, the pressure for hospital staff to process and discharge ER patients more and more quickly continues.

The pressure has resulted in several other problems, as ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud has predicted:

- 1. Hallway Nursing.** The pressure to process patients who come in through the ER has led to patients needing to be admitted when there are no available beds in other units instead being parked in hallways, broom closets and in some cases, shower rooms. These patients lack privacy, ONA has concerns about infection control, and hospitals do not add extra nurses to staff these beds.
- 2. Longer Wait Times.** Patients in hospital will experience longer wait times for care, for procedures and for surgeries as vital nurses and physicians struggle to care for too many patients with too few staff.
- 3. An Increase in Errors.** The pressure to care for more patients and work longer hours has resulted in an increase in errors and a risk to patient safety. Studies have shown that for every extra patient added to an average nurses' workload, the risk of a patient suffering more complications and even death rises by seven per cent.

UNDER THE RADAR

News the Media is Missing

Two News Reports Contain Interesting Nuggets of Information About Hospital Communications

Two recent news stories – the release of information related to Peterborough Regional Health Centre and a wrongful dismissal suit in Windsor – have proven what ONA has long suspected about hospital communications.

■ The *Peterborough Examiner* recently won a long battle to obtain documents related to the hospital's plans for post-construction operating plan funding ([source](#)).

It took reporter Fiona Isaacson and the *Examiner* publishers two years and an appeal to the Information and Privacy Commissioner to gain access to the documents.

Intriguingly for ONA, the documents reveal a nugget of information that proves what we have long suspected: **a requirement that the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care approve the information and wording of communications to the media and public about funding issues.**

ONA has long seen a sort of “template” of communications from hospitals that was close to identical and it goes something like this:

- The hospital is cutting RN positions;
- Affected RNs can be moved to other units in the hospital and won't necessarily have to be “out the door;”
- Patient care will not be affected.

■ The other intriguing bit of information was found in a Windsor, Ontario report that Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital's former spokesperson, Kim Spirou, is suing the facility for wrongful dismissal ([source](#)).

Spirou began her career with the hospital in November, 2005 – the day that ONA member Lori Dupont, RN, was murdered by a hospital anesthetist while she worked in the recovery room of Hotel-Dieu.

In the months that followed Lori's murder, the hospital denied any responsibility for keeping the RN safe in the workplace. In the five years that Spirou was in this position, a series of scandals rocked the hospital, including the findings of a coroner's jury that investigated the Dupont murder, mental health patient suicides and unnecessary mastectomies being performed. The provincial government has now appointed a supervisor to take over control of the hospital to try to improve the workplace culture.

Now, Spirou says in a 17-page statement of claim prepared by Windsor lawyer Myron Shulgan that there is a history of Hotel-Dieu suppressing information. Among her claims – not yet proven:

- The CEO, Warren Chant, did not want to divulge to police that an employee, who was later charged, had embezzled funds from the hospital.
- He ordered Spirou to deny hiring lobbyists, which she refused to do.
- He instructed her to tell the media the hospital strictly complied with policies regarding requests for quotes from contractors, when it did not. Spirou again refused to comply with her boss's demand.

ONA will be interested to see this lawsuit unfold. The RNs at Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital continue to hope that what has been described as a “toxic workplace” will improve so that they can focus on providing quality patient care.