

Minister wants new plan for ambulance transfers

By Don Patterson
Assistant Editor

Alberta's health minister wants to end the practice of having ambulances ferry patients from one hospital to another to free up resources for emergency cases, but foothills politicians want the Province to take additional steps to ensure Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in rural areas are protected.

Health Minister Fred Horne said he is concerned about the number of ambulances being used for inter-facility transfers, taking non-emergency patients from one facility to another.

He said the Province is looking at what it can do to address the issue of transfers, but he didn't offer any specific details during a press conference last week.

"We are looking at options right now to move that whole stream of activity outside of the EMS system because we don't want to be tying up EMS equipment and highly trained personnel to move people for non-emergency reasons," said Horne.

As many as 30 per cent of EMS calls are for inter-facility transfers, with most of them scheduled during regular business hours, he said.

Inter-facility transfers were also identified in a Health Quality Council (HQC) report into EMS services released earlier this year.

The Province has been working to address problems with rural EMS since responsibility for ambulances was handed over to Alberta Health Services (AHS) in 2009. Concerns soon emerged over the transition, including long wait times in rural areas, rural ambulances responding to calls in urban areas and a plan to centralize ambulance dispatch.

As a result, the Province ordered the HQC to review EMS services in 2010 and its



SUZANNE OEL
MD of Foothills

report from earlier this year recommended continuing consolidation of dispatch services and creating a plan for EMS service taking into account the needs of urban, rural and remote areas in the province.

Horne said the consolidation of dispatch is almost 95 per cent complete. As well, 85 per cent of all ground ambulance resources are co-ordinated by AHS.

He said having all of Alberta's ambulances on one dispatch system will help to improve response times.

As well, he said the system will help ensure ambulances based in rural communities sent to urban areas to get back as soon as possible.

"If an ambulance gets called out of a smaller rural community to come into the city, we can actually identify that ambulance and make sure that it's not stuck in the city taking other calls," he said.

That said, he added ambulances also can't pass by other emergency situations just because they may not be assigned to a particular community.

MD of Foothills Coun. Suzanne Oel said addressing inter-facility transfers is essential to keep ambulances in rural communities.

"Many of the rural communities have seen this issue and it has left situations where there's either a longer wait time or an ambulance not available," said Oel, who is also the chairperson for the Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission.

Oel said she wants a rural strategy for EMS to address long wait times and ensure rural communities are not be left without an ambulance.

"We need a rural strategy for ambulances and that would be for situations like that, transfers or where ambulances go to the closest call so we definitely have it covered," she said.

Oel said work on EMS protocol was delayed by the spring flood and the minister's update shows there is finally some progress on improving EMS services.

Livingstone-Macleod MLA Pat Stier said inter-facility transfers is one of the biggest problems facing the EMS system and it needs to be addressed.

"Get these taxi-type trips pushed over to another service so that the local ambulances are still in their own calling area," he said.

Stier said a number of EMS services had vehicles and personnel specifically designated to inter-facility transfers that were done away with after provincial amalgamation of ambulance services.

He said he doesn't have a preference for having either the private sector or AHS deal with transfers as both have advantages. While he doesn't want to create additional expenses for taxpayers with a public option, he said there can be a loss of some control by going with the private sector.

"I think the government still needs to maintain some sort of monitoring and administration of it," he said.

He said he remains concerned ambulances are being pulled out of rural communities to respond to calls in other areas, particularly in cities. He wants a commitment from the provincial government that rural ambulances won't get tied up responding to calls in the city and will be able to return to their communities.



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