

# Turning away patients common practice

## Canadian hospitals burdened by caring for seniors

BY AMY CHUNG, POSTMEDIA NEWS JUNE 27, 2011

Dr. Jeff Turnbull remembers a time when turning away patients was just not done.

In the past year, he said he had to cancel 580 procedures at The Ottawa Hospital, where he is chief of staff.

Turning patients away has become an everyday practice in hospitals across the country, something that healthcare providers should not be doing at a time when demand is at its peak, said Turnbull, who is also the president of the Canadian Medical Association.

"We sit every morning to review our percentage occupancy. We don't discuss what we are cancelling, but who we are cancelling," said Turnbull, who also told a story of an 80-year-old patient who underwent a difficult preparation procedure before surgery only to be told that her surgery would be cancelled.

"She broke down in tears. Her two daughters flew from Victoria, B.C., to be by her side. They had to go back and she looked at us and said, 'I can't go through this again,'" Turnbull said.

The 2010 National Physician Survey shows that 47 per cent of patients requiring urgent care can be seen by a doctor within a day. Saskatchewan has the highest rate at 59 per cent, and Quebec has the lowest at 39 per cent.

"I never thought it would take patients three to five days to see a doctor to be dismissed.," Turnbull said. "That's something I'm not proud of."

The survey shows that family physicians see 107 patients per week, excluding those seen while on-call.

Turnbull said that Canada's health-care system featured an increasingly aging population experiencing more chronic and complex illnesses that required long-term care. This trend has been taxing on acute care wards in hospitals across the country, and Turnbull is advocating that federal and provincial governments should consider a

transformative redesign to long-term care in order for patients to gain better access to health care.

"It's not just about adding doctors, or money," Turnbull said.

"On any given day, our hospital will have 40 people in the ER waiting to get admitted. There are people receiving care in the corridor, there's 147 patients in acute care who are waiting for long-term care," he added, explaining that each bed in acute care was costing \$1,200 a day: money that could be spent on new initiatives that would allow medical staff to be more mobile, serving patients closer to home.

"We can move those 147 patients for better care at a fraction of the price, we would be at 90 per cent occupancy, we wouldn't have to cancel surgeries, we won't have six ambulances waiting to unload," Turnbull said.