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Hospital warns of huge cut in cancer care

Princess Margaret to turn away 4,400 patients

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STAFF REPORTERS

Canada's premier cancer hospital will have to turn away 4,400 new patients this year because of a \$20 million budget cut.

Princess Margaret Hospital will be able to handle the patients currently treated there but won't be able to take many new patients, a hospital official warns.

The cutback occurs as cancer patients in Toronto are being forced to wait more than double the medically recommended time for surgery because the University Health Network (UHN) can't afford to open up more operating rooms.

On average, patients waiting for cancer surgery wait 62 days, from date of referral to date of surgery. Surgical oncologists recommend cancer patients wait no longer than 28 days for surgery.

In fact, a number of the network's 35 cancer surgeons have closed off their wait lists, said Tom Closson, chief executive officer of the UHN.

"They aren't taking any new patients on to the list because they think their wait lists are too long. They are encouraging referring physicians to refer their patients elsewhere."

The head of Cancer Care Ontario says the 4,400 patients can still be treated in other GTA hospitals without having to leave the area.

The UHN has been talking with the ministry, hunting for new dollars to ease the cancer surgery backlog, Closson said, "so our surgeons can try and address this backlog of patients out there at the moment."

Cancer programs at the UHN are facing devastating cuts because of fiscal constraints. The UHN, which includes Princess Margaret, the Toronto Hospital and Toronto Western, has been forced to trim \$20 million out of its operating budget.

As a result, Princess Margaret will see 4,400 fewer new people next year, a reduction of 10 per cent of their patient volume.



ANDREW STAWICKI/TORONTO STAR

Patricia Bertucci waited 76 days for surgery at Princess Margaret Hospital to have a breast removed due to cancer in late 2002.

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Dr. Bill Evans, executive vice-president of clinical programs for Cancer Care Ontario, said the Princess Margaret cuts will have a ripple effect.

"Naturally it concerns me because cuts from a prestigious institute that has a lot of very talented physicians and care providers is not without impact," said Evans. Cancer Care Ontario is the coordinating body for cancer services in the province.

"It's certainly not a small number," said Evans. "That's a lot of lives who are troubled by cancer already." He added that other hospitals can absorb the patient shift.

Ontario's former premier Bob Rae recently quit the UHN board of trustees in response to the \$20 million cut.

And staff at Princess Margaret say the cutbacks are straining a system that is already stretched to the limit. "I don't know where the patients are going to go," said one oncology nurse who didn't wish to be identified. "They are seriously ill people."

Rae says that he informed the chair of the hospital's board, Tony Fell, and Closson that after arguing "so strongly against the decision" to cut \$20 million, he felt he couldn't continue on the board.

For the last several years, Rae was chair of the network's quality committee. He spent a great deal of time documenting the challenges facing the hospital, in particular the ways in which delays in treatment were affecting the quality of care.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the cuts being planned will result in further delays in treatment," he wrote in an e-mail to the Star.

Rae added that since he is the national spokesperson of the Leukemia Research Fund and the honorary chair of the Cancer Care Coalition, he felt "that my ability to speak out as an advocate of quality care was incompatible with continuing as a trustee."

Closson wouldn't comment on Rae for leaving the board.