

End ER shutdown "misery," N.S. urged



By DAVID JACKSON Provincial Reporter

Emergency room closures that totalled five months in 2006 will only get worse unless the MacDonald government finds money to ensure doctors are there, the Liberal health critic and an emergency room doctor said Monday.

Glace Bay MLA Dave Wilson released statistics that showed all the emergency room closures at hospitals in rural Nova Scotia over the year totalled 3,701.5 hours, or 154.2 days.

"This is a problem right now that should be treated with the most urgency that you can treat anything because it is an emergency situation," Mr. Wilson said at Province House.

"There are Nova Scotians who cannot access emergency health care because of these closures and it's not right."

Dr. Paul Doucette, who works in emergency at Dartmouth General Hospital and Hants Community Hospital in Windsor, said he hasn't seen people dying because an emergency room wasn't open.

"That would be the worst-case scenario. In advance of that, we have to wonder what kind of suffering are we causing by having the emergency room closed," Dr. Doucette said.

"I think that's more what we're concerned about, is the kind of misery and anxiety that happens in a population because an emergency room is closed."

He said he and five other Dartmouth doctors had agreed last year to help cover shifts in hospitals that were short doctors.

He said they got paid their regular wage for the extra shifts but were hoping the province would come through with more money, about 20 per cent more than the hourly rate.

"We're not talking double or triple, it's just something, that it's a little carrot to get somebody down to another hospital and do some shifts," he said.

Dr. Doucette said in some cases, local motels gave visiting doctors a room for the night.

He said the doctors he worked with gave the Health Department a proposal for their extra services but haven't received a response.

"The interest just sort of died off and we've communicated with them, but we haven't gotten much back," he said. "I want to see the government come through and actually try and provide the financial incentives and otherwise that these doctors need."

Health Minister Chris d'Entremont said he hasn't seen the doctors' proposal. He said there's currently a locum service through the district health authorities and Doctors Nova Scotia.

Mr. d'Entremont said the province has the second-highest number of doctors per capita in Canada, and 188 came here in the last 18 months.

"The challenge that we find is how to get these physicians to these areas that are underserved and getting them to stay," he said.

Dr. Doucette said he'd also like to see the province increase the number of spots for training emergency room doctors. He said some would like to get that training but are turned down and go elsewhere.

New Democrat health critic Dave Wilson said one way to help address the shortage in rural areas is to designate rural seats at medical school.

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