

Hospital parking fee freeze is 'distraction', says MPP

Ontario's Ministry of Health announced Monday the Province has directed hospitals to freeze their parking rates for the next three years.

The announcement, however, was greeted with skepticism from Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones, who says it is a distraction from the real issues facing Ontario's healthcare system.

The freeze was one of a number of announcements made by the Ministry of Health on Monday, which also included discounts on parking fees where hospitals charge more than \$10 per day through 5, 10, and 30 day passes.

Changes, they said, were made in consultation with 'a number of hospitals' and the Ontario Hospital Association.

In Ontario, 45 hospitals offer free parking and 54, including Headwaters, charge \$10 or less for parking per day. However, 36 hospitals charge over this amount.

'Parking fees should never be a barrier for patients when they go to the hospital,' said Dr. Eric Hoskins, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care in a statement. 'With today's announcement, we are providing relief from the high cost of parking at some hospitals in Ontario. By making parking more affordable for patients and their loved ones who visit the hospital often, we are helping to reduce the burden of parking fees and putting patients first.'

But, this is a 'shiny ball diversion tactic' from the real issues, according to MPP Jones, including issues that are top of mind for residents of this riding.

'I double checked with the staff here in my office and, in the last three years, we can recall one phone call about high parking fees and it wasn't related to Headwaters; it was a Toronto hospital where they had multiple visits,' she says. 'One call in three years.'

'I get weekly calls on wait times for surgery, access to physio once they cut out a lot of the physio that was there locally, complaints about the Community Care Access Centres, long-term placement, nursing cuts, so for the Minister to come out and say, 'we're going to put the big hammer down on our hospitals and limit their parking fees is, to me, a tactic away from 'but, please don't ask me about the other issues' I am sure he does get, as I do, and many other MPPs get on a weekly basis.'

MPP Jones says Headwaters' policy to offer monthly rates if there is a long-term stay is 'perfectly appropriate', but it is 'laughable' to suggest parking is a 'burning issue' in Ontario Healthcare.

'I think if we talk to our friends and family, the vast majority of hospital stays now are decreasing,' she says. 'Unless there are mitigating issues, we don't have the long stays in hospital we used to. I just find it is a diversion tactic that they are putting out there so they don't have to talk about the true systemic problems that are happening in our healthcare system that, quite frankly, the Minister of Health does have complete responsibility for.'

'If three months ago you would have called the Minister of Health and said, 'it is too expensive to park at Princess Margaret when I am taking my spouse in for their chemo treatment,' they would have said, 'That's a decision for the Board and you should take that up with the Board.' Suddenly, on Monday, he says we're going to regulate it province-wide? I don't buy it.'

By Brock Weir