

MEDIA STATEMENT

Ontario's Critical Care System Reaching Saturation Point

Toronto, ON, March 26, 2021 – “As the third wave of COVID-19 continues to worsen, the critical care system in Ontario appears to be reaching its saturation point. According to data from Critical Care Services Ontario, today, there are 1,871 patients receiving ICU services in the province, 401 with COVID-related critical illness. 74 new COVID-related admissions to ICU have occurred in the past 48 hours. These levels are already well beyond the threshold after which hospitals can operate normally. If the number of ICU admissions continues to increase in the days ahead, as is expected, Ontario’s hospitals will be under extraordinary pressure to try and ensure equitable access to lifesaving critical care.

Hospitals and their dedicated clinicians will continue to do everything in their power to ensure access to critical care despite these very serious circumstances. Mitigating efforts include ongoing use of the provincial Critical Care Incident Management System to manage critical care resources, the transfer of critically ill patients between hospitals, use of new clinical models to increase human resources capability, and new therapies. However, unlike in the pandemic’s first two waves, many regions now have less flexibility to accept patient transfers because of local capacity pressures. While Ontario’s critical care transport network has been a very effective partner with hospitals, there are also limits to its capabilities.

In this third wave, we are facing a different kind of pandemic. The B.1.1.7 variant that originated in the United Kingdom is taking over, with a much quicker doubling time and more serious health effects for younger populations. Patients are arriving at the hospital younger and sicker than in previous waves, and they require more care. Because there is only one critical care system treating both COVID and non-COVID patients, this increased demand puts everyone at risk. Best efforts will continue to be undertaken to maintain access to scheduled surgery, but unfortunately, further disruption is likely.

The dedicated health care workers in Ontario’s critical care system continue to do everything possible to maintain access to health services and prevent avoidable death and harm. The 2021 Ontario Budget included funding for 3,100 beds to help deal with this situation, and Ontario’s hospitals are grateful for these financial resources. However, the limiting factor is not funding for beds themselves, but rather maintaining appropriate staffing in critical care and for all other hospital-based health services.

The high-water mark for COVID-19 patients in intensive care in Ontario is 420 on January 15th. Ontario seems likely to reach and surpass this in the days ahead. The health system will face punishing conditions in the weeks to come, and it is vital that each and every Ontarian redouble their efforts to protect themselves, their loved ones, and those who continue to fight the virus on the frontlines.

- Anthony Dale, President and CEO, Ontario Hospital Association

-30-

For media inquiries, please contact Amanda Philp, Director of Public Affairs, Ontario Hospital Association, at aphilp@oha.com.