

Mysterious medical lab closings leave surviving labs struggling



The recent unexplained closure of three medical laboratories in Dufferin has led to increased patient volumes at two remaining labs and long wait times for those requiring services.

The two remaining labs – one in Orangeville, the other in Shelburne owned by the same firm – have been a lot busier since other labs in the area shut down. Patients in Orangeville are waiting about two hours for blood work, while those in Shelburne are waiting upwards of an hour on an average day.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones is hoping to bring much needed medical laboratory services back to the riding. She brought up the matter last week at Queen's Park, asking Eric Hoskins, Minister of Health and Long Term Care, to restore funding to physician services in the budget. The government cuts in this area, she said, are resulting in cuts to essential services which people in Orangeville and across the province rely on.

"I'm going to keep the pressure on because the Minister has to understand there are consequences to his decisions," said Ms. Jones. "They need to change the model so that physicians can start offering these services again. But they're not going to provide the service for free, that's not how it works."

Last year, a family doctor in Orangeville wrote a letter to the Ministry and the Premier outlining the negative impacts the cuts to physician services would have on patients in her group practice. She said the group practice was considering shutting down its blood lab. That lab closed on January 1.

As a result, the remaining two LifeLabs in Orangeville and Shelburne have been dealing with a lot more patients.

"We went from five labs in Dufferin down to two," said Ms. Jones, adding that labs in Grand Valley, Shelburne and Orangeville

have shut down. ?It's not that the residents don't need these services anymore, it's just putting more pressure on the remaining labs.? The lab in Orangeville has become so busy that people sometimes are lining up outside on the sidewalk waiting to get in. This is particularly problematic for seniors, especially in the middle of winter, Ms. Jones explained. She noted some patients, such as those with diabetes, are required to take blood tests regularly and have to deal with long wait times every time they attend the clinic.

?I will keep fighting on this issue,? she said, adding that people are welcome to submit petitions or sign the one in her office. ?If people are passionate about it and want to sign that petition, I would encourage them to do so.?

LifeLabs in Orangeville have experienced a significant increase in patients in the past few months.

?We can confirm that since early January 2016, we have seen an increase in the number of patients visiting our Orangeville patient location,? said Stephanie Sayer, communications manager with LifeLabs. ?While we cannot attribute the increase to a specific cause, the experience at our Orangeville location is similar to our experience in other parts of the province as health-care providers, including physician offices, and in some cases hospitals, discontinue specimen collection services for community patients.

?Like all health-care providers in the province, including hospitals and physician offices, community labs like LifeLabs are trying to find a balance between the growing demands for services within a constrained fiscal environment and maintaining quality service to our patients, health-care partners and physicians across Ontario.?

LifeLabs says it is taking steps to deal with the increased volume of patients and plans to make adjustments accordingly.

?LifeLabs continually monitors performance data at our collection centres, such as wait-times, in order to improve how we deliver services to our patients,? said Ms. Sayer. ?We are monitoring our performance at the Orangeville location and will make adjustments to our services as required to address patient volumes.

?In addition, this spring, online appointment booking will become available at our Orangeville location. By visiting [LifeLabs.com](#) patients can book their appointment ahead of time. This service helps reduce wait-times by allowing patients to schedule a visit on a day and time that suits them.?

Why have the other labs closed? Calls to the Health ministry and the Central West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) have thus far failed to produce an explanation.

By Angela Gismondi