

Building on our strength with Ontario's new health minister



It was only a few days after David Caplan was sworn in as Ontario's new health minister in June that I received a call from him. It wasn't the first time I'd spoken with the former

infrastructure minister. In fact, RNAO has an already well-established relationship with the Toronto MPP.

While in opposition as housing critic, he introduced the *Fair Rent Increases Act* to protect tenants, and supported a national housing strategy. Caplan was also one of the ministers responsible for the \$602 million *Affordable Housing Agreement* signed in 2005 with the federal government, which re-engaged governments in this crucial area of work. RNAO applauds Minister Caplan's support and leadership on these issues.

It will be important to see the same leadership on the crucial issue of publicly funded, not-for-profit delivered health care. Minister Caplan's adoption of, and staunch support for, private/public partnerships to build hospital infrastructure in Ontario is a direct threat to Medicare. During his tenure as minister of public infrastructure, we met with him to discuss our opposition. In our most recent conversation in June, I reiterated the nursing community's unwavering commitment to public Medicare.

Minister Caplan said to me that he is tremendously honoured to receive the Premier's trust and appointment as minister of health. He is excited about working with RNAO and developing a closer partnership with nurses. I congratulated him, and shared our commitment to the health of all Ontarians, and our strong desire for a close working relationship with him. To build this relationship, I said it is imperative that nurses see the choices he makes on specific policies.

These include deliverables on: funding and opening 25 additional nurse-practitioner led clinics, promised by the Premier. Three are slated for 2008 and Minister

Caplan confirmed with me that these are already in the works. He must also deliver on all other platform and Throne Speech commitments, including: 9,000 additional nurses (we expect 6,500 of these to be RNs); achieving 70 per cent full-time employment for all working nurses; guaranteed employment for new nursing graduates (we expect it to be full-time employment); and investments in healthy work environment initiatives that will keep nurses and serve to attract additional ones into the profession.

I conveyed that we will work hard with him to deliver on all these commitments. I added that RNAO and nurses will be his

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biggest champions for initiatives that serve to strengthen Medicare, and would fiercely oppose those that weaken it.

My conversation with Minister Caplan brought back memories of his predecessor George Smitherman, who visited us the day after taking office. I recall Minister Smitherman's insightful question on that visit. He asked what his first priority should be as a minister determined to improve health care in Ontario. My answer was decisive: "Balance the power base between the hospital sector and all other sectors – and between medicine and all other health professions – and you will be well on your way to meaningful and positive health reforms." That meeting set the tone for the five years that followed. Minister Smitherman turned

to RNAO and to nurses many times throughout his term to get our views on various health-care issues.

Smitherman's attention to the needs of nurses and his recognition of the impact of the nursing workforce on health care was intense, and we worked on many initiatives that have strengthened the profession and our ability to serve Ontarians. We wish him well in his new ministerial appointment, and we know that our paths will continue to cross.

As we start working closely with Minister Caplan, my advice doesn't change. The McGuinty platform and Throne Speech set a clear path for vital initiatives to boost the profession and serve the public. For that, it is essential Minister Caplan move quickly with the legislative changes that will allow existing and new extended class RNs to fully serve the public.

He must also provide assurances of the government's continued work to strengthen home care by ending competitive bidding; and improve elder care by setting – in law – a minimum of 3.5 hours of daily nursing care in all long-term care facilities.

RNAO also expects support from the minister on key issues that affect health outcomes, but which are not directly under his responsibility. I am referring to social and environmental determinants of health. We want him to actively participate in the government's poverty reduction plan, advocating for clear and ambitious targets. We also want him to support tough regulations for the new provincial ban on cosmetic pesticides; and to move swiftly to reduce toxins and carcinogens in the food chain and in the environment. These are vital determinants of health.

Our 'new beginning' with Minister Caplan is sure to be a mix of fun and challenge. Above all, I know we will build a strong and productive relationship together. The public and nurses deserve no less. **RN**

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