

Q&A: Ontario Health Minister Deb Matthews on the doctor war

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CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca talked with Ontario Health Minister Deb Matthews about the physician fee negotiation situation in Ontario:

Q: What exactly does a “real wage freeze” mean?

You know our fiscal situation in the province is very challenging. We are determined to get back to balance in five years. (A freeze) means every expenditure we make, we have to look at closely and make tough decisions. There’s no question in my mind that what the system, what the patients need, is more investment in home care and community care. My decision was to hold hospitals at a zero base increase, hold physicians at a zero increase. We spent \$11 billion on physicians last year. We’re going to do the same this year. How are we going to get there? We know there are some savings we can find within that \$11 billion. For example: there are some specialties, a small number, where the ability to care for people, the number of people they can care for, has gone up very quickly because of improvements to technology.

Q: So by wage freeze, you mean wage cut for some specialists?

Only for the very highest paid specialists where they’ve seen the windfall gains—ophthalmologists, diagnostic radiologists, those specialties where the technology has been a wonderful advantage.

Q: There’s a sense among physicians that the Ontario’s McGuinty government is anti-doctor. What do you say to that?

Nothing could be further from the truth. I have the most enormous respect for Ontario doctors. On average, doctors’ incomes have gone up by 75% since we were elected. Health care is a lot better now than when we took office, in part because of the great relationship we have with doctors. We recognized that Ontario doctors were underpaid and we addressed that.

Q: If doctors face deep cuts, as they did in the 1990s, do you think we're poised for another doctor exodus?

I've looked at other jurisdictions and there's nowhere for doctors to go. Ontario doctors are more highly paid than in the United States and Europe. Doctors have been doing very well. If you look at family docs, they've had an 85% increase in a few years. We have made the investment and it has had the desired effect: Medical students are now choosing family medicine. Now we need to have the same focus on enhancing community care and home care.

Q: What can physicians expect next from the Ontario government?

We are in a time of real transformation of the health system. We're not looking at rolling back fees for physicians but we do think there are some specialties where the earnings have increased rapidly thanks to technological improvements. We are going to be making cuts in order to fund population growth. We know we can fund a 1.2% increase by just thinking hard about the expenditures we're already making.