

LHIN to expand access to care

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With Thursday's release of a three-year plan for the Hamilton, Niagara, Haldimand and Brant LHIN, chairwoman Juanita Gledhill believes all the naysayers have been proven wrong. In 2005, when the province swept away the old system of district health councils and established 14 local health integration networks, Niagara critics predicted all services would soon be centralized in Hamilton. Gledhill said those fears were also common in Haldimand and Brant. And funnily enough, there were those in Hamilton concerned about handling all these patients coming from outlying areas. But flipping through the first three-year plan, she points to programs and initiatives being headed by Hamilton hospitals, but focused on bringing big-city services to more people. "The LHIN helped those conversations take place, helped those models move outside Hamilton," Gledhill said at the release party held at Grimsby's Casablanca Winery Inn. "It's about building relationships." It's also about building the LHIN system. The document contains few timelines, but Gledhill stresses this plan should be seen as a beginning and that many of these strategies are just past the idea stage. "We are one-fourteenth of a new way of thinking about health care in Ontario," she said. Among the network's priorities are: Children's mental health services – Led by McMaster Children's Hospital, more training for staff at local agencies and organizations, plus more co-ordination between the hospital and rehabilitation services. E-health – Over time, the LHIN hopes to create an information network connecting the 250 health-care providers under its umbrella. As a result, a patient wouldn't have to repeat personal details or have the same tests done again with each referral. This is seen to be key for communities with lots of new immigrants and poor literacy rates. Co-ordinated efforts to reduce workplace injury and illness. More training for palliative care staff. A subnetwork to oversee geriatric services. The LHIN plan also lays out provincial priorities and how they'll be applied in Brant, Hamilton, Haldimand and Niagara: The establishment of family health teams (13 are slated for the LHIN) and community health centres (three in the works in Niagara) to reduce wait times and make up for family doctor shortages. Reducing wait times with innovative projects. Two Hamilton strategies for cataract and joint replacement surgery will be expanded across the LHIN. A study conducted with the neighbouring Waterloo-Wellington LHIN recommends opening a regional vascular surgery centre in Hamilton with satellite sites specializing in veins and arteries, including one in St. Catharines.

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