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Co-op aims to keep doctors in Aylmer

Patients pay \$50 enrolment fee for preferential treatment

BY DAVE ROGERS

Fed up with the growing doctor shortage in Aylmer and the tendency of Quebec to send local physicians to remote communities, Dr. Bernard Gélinas has formed a health care co-operative that his patients control.

Each patient who pays a \$50 enrolment fee is assured of preferential treatment. The co-operative plans to recruit more doctors and buy new medical equipment.

Doctors can't afford to invest in new equipment when they receive only \$16.10 per visit, Dr. Gélinas said. The fees will help the co-operative secure loans for equipment such as a blood oxygen monitor that indicates when people are sick enough to be admitted to hospital.

Patients who join the co-operative can make an appointment by telephone and wait at home until a doctor can see them. Others have to wait in line at the Du Couvent Street clinic until they can be treated.

Martin St-Louis, a spokesman for Quebec's Ministry of Health in the Outaouais, said the government has no objections to the co-operative as long as it doesn't charge patients for treatment covered by provincial health insurance.

"As long as the doctors do not overcharge for medical services, we have no problem with the co-operative," Mr. St-Louis said. "If it is a way of organizing medical practice that is good for doctors, we have nothing against it.

"We are giving the co-op incentives that will help it recruit new doctors. New doctors must spend a number of hours doing compulsory medical work like duty in the emergency room. Now working at the co-op will be counted towards that service."

The clinic hopes to recruit more family doctors by offering an attractive lifestyle in an urban community with convenient access to five universities and community colleges.

The co-operative started with 50 members in January and now has almost 3,000. Dr. Gélinas said yesterday the co-

operative is a tool to help Aylmer cope with a health care system that takes doctors from the community and sends them to hospital emergency rooms or under-serviced rural communities.

The area is facing a health care crisis because there are only 14 doctors for about 70,000 people in Aylmer, western Hull and the eastern Pontiac. Dr. Gélinas said Aylmer needs at least 30 doctors, but six are leaving next year to earn higher fees by filling in for other doctors or to practise in Hull.

The Aylmer clinic used to have 12 doctors, but seven have left because they can earn more elsewhere.

"One-third of the medical clinics in Quebec have closed during the last five years because doctors can't afford to maintain them," Dr. Gélinas said. "The overhead is too high and the fees are too low, so young doctors don't want to work in them any more."

Dr. Gélinas said many young doctors prefer to work in government clinics, in the back of pharmacies or big box stores.

"We had two physicians that we recruited from Ontario during the late 1990s, but soon they were ordered to do emergency room service in Shawville and Wakefield. Life became impossible, so they quit to do emergency room service and palliative care in Hull."

Dr. Gélinas said he and his colleagues formed the co-operative when they realized the province wasn't interested in the concerns of five doctors in the Aylmer clinic. They figured if the community ran the clinic, it would be politically more difficult to take doctors away.

"The people of Aylmer have been abandoned," Dr. Gélinas said. "There is no government-run clinic here. If the regional health board decides to take away another doctor from Aylmer, they will have to deal with the people."

"People here are willing to pay \$50 for membership in the co-op. They buy a right to speak, a right to vote, to be committed and get involved."