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Inside York University's pitch for a med school

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TORONTO | In June, York University will submit its formal proposal to the Ontario government to create Canada's newest medical school here.

If the project is greenlighted, it will provide its students with an innovative community-based approach to practising medicine the likes of which have not been seen in Canada, according to Dr. Peter Walker, the former University of Ottawa dean of medicine who was recently named special adviser to the enterprising venture.

Moreover, and equally as important, Dr. Walker said, the proposed school will also provide much-needed physician resources to the rapidly expanding and diverse communities surrounding the university that are already underserved.

The post-secondary institute is in north Toronto but on the border with York region, the fastest growing census division in Canada, comprised of dense suburban areas, small-town bedroom communities and rural agriculture stretches. The 2006 population was approximately 900,000 and it is expected to surpass 1.5 million residents by 2031.

"Currently, it's around 16% of the total Greater Toronto Area population. In 25 years, it will represent 35%, so it's going to take up more space and importance in the GTA," said Dr. Walker.

York region also has an incredibly mixed cultural milieu, he added; dozens of languages are spoken and socioeconomic status varies radically depending on district.

"It's a very diverse region (with) a very large immigrant population, so they have special needs and special requirements for education, and a large percentage of them are going to want access to higher education and professional education in particular."

Given that statistically many medical students wind up practising close to the school they attended, the hope is that graduating doctors will also want to stick around and continue working in the local districts.

"The GTA and York region is a very rich area for the development of a medical school," Dr. Walker said. "It's a great place to live, learn and work."

York University's proposal will emphasize a unique approach focused on community-based education and teaching that will involve all hospitals and community health centres in its surrounding area. Its primary goal is to create more family health teams to better serve patients.

"There's a lot of talk being given over to how doctors can work effectively with nurses, social workers, psychologists and other members of the health team," Dr. Walker said. "We're piloting certain things but we're not rolling it out generally across the system. We don't spend enough time in education with cross-team learning."

He explained that in his experience, the vast majority of education is centred around either the medical school proper during the first couple of years, with some community exposure, and then in the later years is largely focused on conventional academic teaching hospitals.

"What we're hoping to do is involve the community teaching sites extensively from the get-go and to build the training environments that are not the large academic teaching hospitals but rather community hospitals, where you get the flavour and experience dealing with issues that are more common and more relevant to patient needs."

Decision in early 2009

After the proposal is submitted to government, he said York University doesn't expect to hear a final decision until early 2009 but "the sooner we get a response the faster we can get up and going on the final planning and the recruitment of leadership that would be required to run the school."

Assuming such final steps fall in sequence and without significant interruptions, he expects York could enrol its first class by 2011.

Regarding costs, Dr. Walker said it was too early to speculate on the finances required for the initial and ongoing operations of the proposed school. Instead, he's more focused on determining what the size of the tentative program should be.

He said that right now in Canada, medical schools achieve maximum efficiency with approximately 150 to 175 new students per year, but if he has his way, York's program will start smaller so that experience can be gained. Necessary adjustments can then be made along the way and more faculty can be hired as the student population expands to its targeted goal.

"Based on my conversations nationally and internally, there is a tremendous amount of excitement and enthusiasm about the medical school being proposed at York," Dr. Walker said.

"I think it's going to be a relatively easy thing to attract some of the best minds to this new initiative."