



News Release

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TELEPHONE HEALTH SERVICES: TOO FEW CALLS, TOO MANY HANG-UPS, SAYS AUDITOR GENERAL

(TORONTO) Only a small portion of Ontario's population uses telephone health services, Auditor General Jim McCarter says in his *2009 Annual Report*, released today.

"We found that Ontario's telephone health service logged 905,000 phone calls last year while Quebec, with just 60% of our population, had two million calls," McCarter said. "Even Alberta, which has just one-quarter of Ontario's population, logged one million calls. This suggests the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care must do more to ensure people know about the availability of these services."

Furthermore, although the private-sector service provider does not track how long callers wait on the telephone before speaking to a nurse, it indicated that one in four of these callers hung up before speaking to a nurse.

Ontario has two teletriage services offering the opportunity to talk to a nurse about health matters:

- Telehealth Ontario, launched in 2001, is available free to all callers 24/7.
- Telephone Health Advisory Service (THAS), launched in 2003, is available evenings, nights, and weekends to the 8.4 million people enrolled with physicians participating in such primary health-care arrangements as family-health teams.

A private service provider delivers both Telehealth Ontario and THAS services under contract to the Ministry and employs almost 300 registered nurses at its five call centres across the province. In the 2008/09 fiscal year, payments to the service provider totalled about \$35 million.

Among the findings in the Report:

- The Ministry paid the service provider about \$39 for each of the first 900,000 registered calls, and about \$27 per call after that. The three other provinces that shared cost information with the Auditor said their costs were about \$20 per call. The Ministry had not examined these significant cost differences.
- Although more than 60% of Ontario's population was enrolled with physicians participating in various primary health-care arrangements, and therefore eligible to use the THAS service, only 1% of those eligible used it in 2008/09.
- British Columbia and Quebec use the easily remembered "811" phone number for teletriage, and several other provinces also plan to adopt it. Quebec reported a 15% increase in call volume following its implementation. However, Ontario had no plans to adopt "811" at the time of the audit.

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