

## Ontario to expand role of physician assistants

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Ontario residents hoping to avoid long waits at hospital emergency rooms could soon find themselves being treated by an unfamiliar type of health-care professional: the physician assistant.

Health Minister George Smitherman said Thursday that physician assistants have played a long-standing role in the Canadian Armed Forces and in the United States, and he sees opportunities for them in the provincial health-care system.

Smitherman said the province is reviewing the data from a one-year pilot project at six Ontario emergency rooms which deployed physician assistants in teams with nurse practitioners, and he is already liking what it sees.

"We've seen anecdotally ... it does seem like where the nurse practitioners and physician assistants have been deployed together, that has been an effective model," he said.

"We would ... offer to Ontarians this as one more example of how we can utilize the skill set of health-care professionals to make sure that their access to health care is timely, effective and gives them a good degree of patient satisfaction."

Smitherman said it's "a little bit early" to determine the exact role physician assistants would play in Ontario's health-care system. He said there are other two-year pilot projects underway to evaluate the role of physician assistants in other areas of hospitals in addition to emergency departments and community health centres.

"We know that there are lots and lots of places where human resources are in such scarce supply that we have to be really smart and use our health-care professionals to their broadest scope of practice," Smitherman said.

"We think it's also an exciting opportunity to lure some Canadians back home to be practising as physician assistants."

Conservative health critic Elizabeth Witmer said she supports increased roles for both nurse practitioners and physician assistants, and believes they would also be a big help in long-term care facilities.

"People who have them in their hospitals have told me they do appreciate (PAs), and it has made a difference," Witmer said in an interview.

"Whatever we can do to make sure that people have access to health care, we need to do."

However, Witmer said more than one million Ontarians are still without a family doctor, and she warned that an increased role for physician assistants won't solve that problem, especially when there aren't many trained PAs in Canada.

So far, Manitoba is the only province in Canada to have legislation governing the roles and responsibilities of physician assistants.

The Ontario Medical Association said physician assistants will have the education and skills to deal with daily health-care needs as well as medical emergencies.

They will carry out their duties under the supervision of a physician, and their duties will vary depending on the doctor's area of practice.