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Hard choices in elder care challenge

I've seen it close up.

Our ability and desire to keep the aged alive, collides with their inevitable loss of dignity. It is a conundrum of our age. We recognize that how we deal with old age is a measure of our society and so we spend untold dollars in the care and keeping of our elderly.

We have nursing homes, long term care facilities, retirement homes, assisted living residences and family care arrangements. With all these options, and with this entire infrastructure in place, making decisions for the aged is still difficult.

Ontario's health system recognizes the specific, ongoing and significant needs of the elderly. The high priority we place on funding this chapter in our lives, using money that might be spent reducing wait times on other procedures, is a reflection of the importance we place on caring for the elderly.

While I was in government Premier Mike Harris recognized the difficulties that Ontarians struggle with in the care of the elderly. He made it a priority to greatly expand the number of beds in long term care facilities across the province.

Halton began that process as the Region with the least number of available beds per older person. Today there are multiple new facilities in all four of Halton's member municipalities and a total of more than 1,700 new beds for people in Halton.

In addition, we marked existing facilities for upgrades. However, upgrades, like the expansion of Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital, have been stalled under the McGuinty Liberals. Nor

have the McGuinty Liberals built any additional long term care beds or paid much attention to the situation that the elderly and their families find themselves.

Premier Harris was far-sighted. Premier McGuinty has been negligent, and the problem grows.

So where do we go? As our population ages we in Ontario will face higher costs just to maintain the level of care that they currently enjoy. And yet we have little choice but to pay those costs in order to maintain a level of dignity for our elderly.

Families will have to shoulder some of the additional responsibility. Our governments will have to step up with programs and tax breaks to support families which take on elder care.

There are already programs in place providing tax credits for care givers but it's just the start. The time is now, for the creation and testing of various initiatives. We face several decades which will test our willingness to sacrifice for our elderly.

The majority of us will require these services at some point; the real question is what level of spending is appropriate and what is the cost to the rest of society?

Hard choices face the government. Hard choices that cannot be put off much longer or we risk that the necessary facilities and programs will not be in place when the need is the greatest.