



Earlier this month Alberta Health Minister, Ron Liepert, announced the government's change in health care policy for seniors in his document "Aging in the Right Way". For residents in the communities of the Sheep River Health Trust (SRHT), this age group represents the largest population segment.

The document spoke of the expense of the current approach for caring for senior citizens. It concluded that home care is far preferable to hospital care if the medical diagnosis allows such home treatment. The elderly prefer this approach as it provides independence and dignity so vital to the elderly's mental and physical well being.

The rural communities including those in the Sheep River area are already practicing what the minister is advocating as much as possible. Staffing is the real challenge. Health care of seniors is already being provided by nurses who often travel to the patients to tend to medical needs. There is a distinction between the issues in the urban areas versus those in the rural areas. In the urban areas, there are teams of specialists who are accessible to the patient. In contrast, the country nurse must have the training and skills to handle many different medical issues for all ages - including palliative care, blood draws, health monitoring, wound care, and monitoring of mental health and social issues. They tend to the patients in their homes in weather such as we experienced over the past two weeks. This approach can only be performed successfully in partnership with the family of the patient.

The demands of seniors for health care are forecasted to increase with the arrival of private living accommodations for seniors. In asking these facilities what percentage of the residents are predicted to use the Okotoks Wellness Centre or the Oilfields General Hospital, the response is that those residents in the 24-hour care facility will have round-the-clock staff in addition to that which is provided by our government health care. What about the independent and mobile resident? They will inevitably use the Wellness Centre or the hospital. From the information provided by the elderly care facilities in Okotoks, many of their clients come from urban centres (Calgary, Lethbridge). These are adding aged population to our already crowded health care system.

The SRHT is reviewing this changing development. Without the planning and approved budgets, the Sheep River communities will be sorely tested to cope with the demands.