

# Martha's Monthly

Feminist analysis of public policy in Alberta



## A THOUSAND DUCKS FEAST ON ALBERTANS

By Lisa Lambert

*Martha hates to be right sometimes.*

Last year she was having coffee with a friend who was concerned about provincial cuts to long term care beds. Martha predicted that Albertans had just begun to feel the effects of the Health Minister's cuts, "it's like being bitten by a thousand ducks - they don't kill us with one single bite but they'll kill us with a thousand smaller bites, each one small and seemingly isolated." How sad that Martha was right. Just last month the (un)Health Minister announced that Alberta Hospital in Edmonton would be closing acute psychiatric care beds in favour of "community care".

Community care, in this case, is promised community care because everyone agrees that the current level of community care is not capable of absorbing more need.

The reaction to the government's announcement was swift.

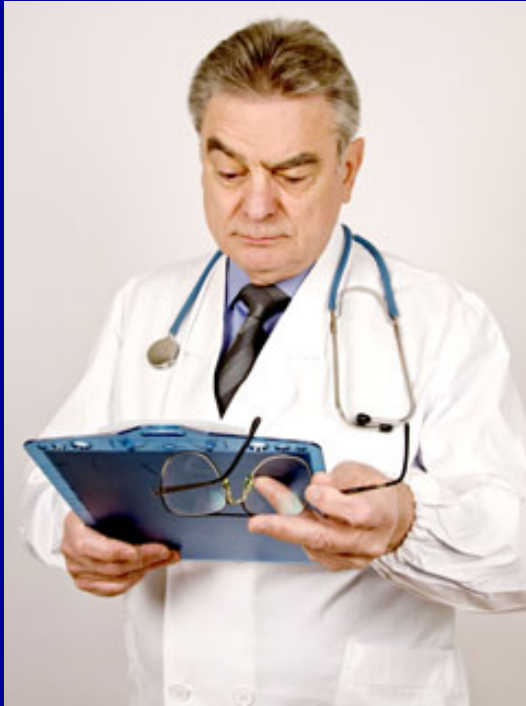
The usual suspects lined up to voice their opposition. Except, opposition was not coming from only from the usual corners. Opposition to the plan to cut acute beds came from a staff psychiatrist, police officers, the head of the Edmonton police association, the Mayor, social service agencies, unions, the Schizophrenia Society, and mental health advocates (see: [recipe for disaster](#)). The Friends of Medicare cautioned people not to take Alberta Health Services' word for what was happening: "No matter how Alberta Health Services tries to slice it, this is a deep and significant cut to acute care to necessary essential health care here in the province of Alberta," said Friends of Medicare executive director David Eggen.

On August 14th, in announcing the closure, Dr. Patrick White, the clinical director for addiction and mental health said, "There is going to be a movement of resources. A greater movement of resources into the community with these patients and movement of staff as well," and while he admitted the community was not prepared to provide this care at this time he assured Albertans that no one would be released to the street.

*Then the most amazing thing happened.*



[Edmonton Journal: Recipe for Disaster](#)



**President's Letter to AMA**



On September 9th Dr. White gave two weeks notice for his job. He claims there is no connection to the announcement of bed closures but that he wanted, as president-elect of the Alberta Medical Association (AMA), to have no appearance of a conflict of interest. Funny thing is that he was acclaimed into that position some time ago (an AMA President's letter from April 2009 notes his acceptance of the nomination) so why wait until Sept 9th to quit?

Maybe, just maybe, Dr. White read the President's letter to the AMA on September 3, 2009 (see it [here](#)) and thought it time to quit Alberta Health Services.

In that letter, current AMA President Dr. Noel Grisdale calls the cuts to Alberta Hospital a "cause for concern" and questions how having fewer acute care beds for the mentally ill is an appropriate way to manage mental illness. He warns doctors to be concerned because of the lack of a "rigorous and transparent process" preceding these cuts and reminds them that previous attempts at de-institutionalization into the community have too often led to significant problems for those released to a family and a community that lack the resources to provide care.

Or perhaps Dr. White heard about the nearly 500 people who packed a hall in Edmonton to talk about the impact of cuts to them. Psychiatrists, people with mental health issues, nurses, union leaders, and concerned citizens all said the same thing: it is ludicrous to cut acute beds.

It is not like the Alberta mental health system is full of empty beds and there is no need for the care.

There is a severe shortage of acute care beds for psychiatric inpatients and a shortage of community care for people accessing care as outpatients. This was a fact noted in the Auditor General's 2008 report when he highlighted a shortage of community services for people living with mental health issues: "Without housing and supportive living programs in place, the quality of life for mental-health patients may deteriorate." His report said what we are all thinking at this point: deteriorating quality of life for mental health patients will cause relapses in their illnesses and relapses cause longer hospital stays.

Good community care for those living with mental health issues must be backed up with access to acute beds. We cannot eliminate the need for acute care beds. (See also: [more questions than answers](#))

[CBCNews.ca: More concerns, suspicions about Alberta hospital cuts](#)

**Use the letter provided (copy and paste it into the body of your email), or write your own. [Send the Health Minister an email NOW.](#)**

**If you want to see community care and access to acute beds as part of Alberta's approach to mental illness then please:**

***pass on this email to your friends***

***and write an email to the Health Minister calling on him to ensure that people with mental health issues have BOTH community resources and access to acute beds.***

**You can use the email below as a template but please add your own thoughts and experiences of the mental health system in Alberta because personal letters have more impact.**

**Send your email to:** [premier@gov.ab.ca](mailto:premier@gov.ab.ca), [marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca](mailto:marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca), [calgary.west@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:calgary.west@assembly.ab.ca), [ND@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:ND@assembly.ab.ca), [calgary.mountainview@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:calgary.mountainview@assembly.ab.ca)

September 16, 2009

Dear Premier Stelmach and Minister Liepert:

The closing of 246 acute care beds at Alberta Hospital in Edmonton is not acceptable. The proper provision of mental health services in the community requires the backup and accessibility of acute care beds in hospitals. The idea that seriously ill people should access care in the community would not be accepted for any life-threatening medical condition and it should not be considered a reasonable intervention for people with mental illnesses that can also be life-threatening due to the risk of suicide or other self-harm.

Alberta's health system must ensure that mentally ill Albertans have access to appropriate community services and at this point those services are inadequate. The price of properly funded community care for people with chronic mental health issues is not cheap, nor should it be. A well funded system of supports can reduce the hospitalization rates for the mentally ill but these community supports must be both well funded and be supported by accessibility to acute care beds when needed. To date Alberta has failed at both providing adequately funded support services in the community and in providing timely access to acute care beds. Your recent announcement to cut beds at AB Hospital concerns everyone that is mentally ill, their family, the police, social services, and all members of community. We call on you to stop the hospital bed closures immediately and to increase funding to community support services before you tinker with the acute care beds supply.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME AND FULL ADDRESS