

Emergency department trends *through Covid*

Last summer and throughout 2020, people were staying away from emergency departments (EDs) across Ontario and South Muskoka Memorial Hospital was no different. They called it “Covid hesitancy” and it was driven by fear of increased exposure to Covid when visiting a hospital. The ED typically sees a whopping 25% of annual visits during the two summer months of July and August. Compared to summer 2019, summer 2020 saw an 11% drop in emergency department visits. Then summer 2021 brought the ED visits almost back to pre-Covid levels.

The reason for the summer 2021 numbers is complex to unravel. “The increase,” says Dr. John Simpson, Director and Chief of Emergency Services, “is because many people who would usually be travelling have stayed home in Ontario and we’ve had more people coming to our area and staying here.” He suspects the numbers would have risen even higher had there not been other factors at play, such as the introduction of the new Ontario Virtual Doctor program.

Another trend in the ED is what doctors call a ‘higher level of acuity’ or patients coming into the ED with more severe injuries. “Part of that is risk behaviour,” says Simpson, such as water sports and outdoors activities, very typical of Muskoka summers but exacerbated by Covid. “People have been cooped up and locked down, so we’re seeing the effects of that.” The other part is an aspect of Covid hesitancy where people don’t visit the ED until their health issue becomes more severe. Along with that are increased visits from those patients waiting longer for surgery and encountering complications as a result of those delays.

The two new secure rooms that have been built in the emergency department last year have been heavily used, in fact, Simpson says rarely a day goes by when there isn’t at least one in use when he starts his ED shift. The rooms are used for numerous purposes – safety and security being foremost. Patients waiting for mental health assessments or psychiatric treatment elsewhere will have privacy and safety in these rooms. They also are used to safely detain violent patients. Increased hospitalization from drug abuse reported elsewhere in Ontario hasn’t happened at our hospital. But it could, warns Simpson. “Civil violence, spousal abuse and mental health



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issues have all increased.” He believes the Narcan program (administering medication to counteract an overdose) has contributed in saving lives and helping people stay away from the ED.

The biggest threat to the ED is the level of staff burnout. “The fourth wave will keep coming,” says Simpson. “Segregating and treating people makes our work exhausting.” This constant hyper-vigilance with Covid protocols is necessary to protect themselves, the current patient and the next patient. Staff shortages occur when employees are too exhausted and turn down extra shifts when offered, a problem that didn’t exist pre-Covid.

Despite all this, “We’re optimistic, hopeful and we’re trying our best,” says Simpson. “The community knows we’re hanging in there but it has turned into a Covid marathon. We’ve learned a lot but we don’t know which mile we’re on.”

Despite the challenges, Simpson says, “We’re here to look after you and please know that the ED is a safe place to come. We’re fortunate in our community to have the necessary equipment and we have a good group of staff here to help you.”

Two dedicated leaders *set to retire*

By late 2021, two of the best-known faces at the hospital will retire. South Muskoka Hospital Foundation's (SMHF) Executive Director Colin Miller and Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare's (MAHC) President & CEO Natalie Bubela have served in their current positions for 17 and 11 years, respectively. These two esteemed leaders of the hospital will leave big shoes to fill, according to their Board Chairs. "During her tenure at MAHC," said MAHC Board Chair Cameron Renwick, "Natalie has faced challenges with grace, balancing the complexities of sustainable health care delivery with an unwavering focus on what is best for the patient."

SMHF Board member and previous Chair Paul Hammond is quick to point to the significance of Miller's contribution and looks fondly back on their teamwork efforts. "I could get the front door open and he could explain the needs of the hospital... and 90% of the time we came away with a cheque or a commitment." Miller steadfastly recognizes the community's role when he says, "While 'it takes a village to raise a child,' it takes a community to raise money for a hospital."

During their tenures, Miller and Bubela both knew how important it was to ensure the hospital was equipped with the latest technology. It was an ongoing challenge to educate the public about the role of government funding, which covers operating costs yet provides very little for hospital equipment. Miller and Bubela knew the message was becoming understood when the two major capital campaigns of the Foundation finished ahead of schedule and surpassed goals. The credit for that, Miller insists, "is a real testament to the hard work of our volunteers and the generosity of the Muskoka community."

Miller also credits his colleagues as a source of inspiration: "Sometimes it has been their energy that has renewed my own interest or reignited my own passion." Bubela echoes the gratitude she has for her team: "I have been truly blessed to work with a fantastic team throughout my tenure." When

her team publicly defended her during a period of public controversy, she recalled, "feeling grateful for the support of the management team during a difficult time. I felt like I was not alone."



I am very proud of what we have achieved together ... Everything has a beginning and an end and the timing to end this chapter seems about as right as it could be.

Under Bubela's leadership, the hospital has seen improved financial health and received numerous awards and high ratings for patient care and operational effectiveness. She is respected for going the extra mile in supporting her staff and, beyond the hospital walls, building strong community relationships.

Miller and Bubela worked well together, as Bubela explains, "I have always enjoyed and appreciated the collaborative relationship with Colin and the supportive working relationship

with the Foundation Board and staff." And Miller about Bubela: "Natalie has been a source of inspiration and pride for this hospital. I have nothing but respect and admiration for what she has accomplished during her career at MAHC."

What happens when these two luminaries retire? Well, they don't want to embrace a life of leisure... entirely. They have both chosen part-time work in the health care and fundraising arenas. Bubela will continue her role as a health care surveyor for Accreditation Canada and Miller will be consulting for other fundraising organizations. There will be space in their schedules for leisure activities, however. For Bubela, there will be more time with family, to read, walk the dogs and travel. For Miller, he says he's "going to take the winter to regroup, relax and do some serious downhill skiing in Ontario and Quebec."

Last words to the community? Bubela says, "Thank you for your support over the past decade. Be kind to my successor and welcome them to the region and to MAHC." And Miller's last words: "I am very proud of what we have achieved together and they have been times I will never forget. Everything has a beginning and an end and the timing to end this chapter seems about as right as it could be."

Looking back... with gratitude

As my last day prior to retirement approaches, I'm filled with nostalgia and gratitude. The past 17 years here at the Foundation have been far more rewarding than I anticipated when I walked through these doors the first time for my interview. It's you I have to thank for that – your caring and commitment inspired me as I eagerly looked forward to see what each new day would bring.

In my prior life, I was a seasoned fundraising professional, having worked on significant campaigns for a number of large city not-for-profits. Yet I yearned for a change, something that would be a new challenge and draw me more deeply into a community. I knew within minutes of coming through the door that this was where I wanted to be.

Working for a community hospital brought a whole new level of connection for me – within these hospital walls and out into the community. I came to you as an outsider, a transplant from the city, yet you always ensured I felt welcome. You invited me into your home, your club, your cottage and your lives. I saw your passion for the community and was awed at what it meant to you when we spoke about the importance of the hospital.

There have been some unique-to-Muskoka experiences I would never have had if I'd stayed in the city. How many people get the opportunity to be transported by antique wooden boat to meet with a donor on

a covered porch overlooking Lake Muskoka? We relaxed, enjoyed a cold drink and talked about the needs of the hospital. Only in Muskoka. At every turn, I was honoured to receive contributions such as those earned from an eight-year-old child knitting headbands or a memorial golf tournament that promises to outlive us all.



The times shared, friendships forged and the incredible successes we've enjoyed have been an extraordinary part of my life.

I've pondered why this community is different. Part of it is the depth of the roots of the families, some going back to the early 1800s, and another part is the mindset of the people here today. The connections are bigger in a small community and I am grateful that you let me build my own bond with Muskoka and with you. Your generosity and support made my job easier and your dedication to the hospital ensured my job was thoroughly rewarding.

To all of the wonderful people I've had the opportunity to work with over the past 17 years – thank you. The times shared, friendships forged and the incredible successes we've enjoyed have been an extraordinary part of my life.



Hospital Auxiliary *restarts gradually*

Prior to March 2020, the South Muskoka Memorial Hospital (SMMH) Auxiliary was a robust organization, with 177 dedicated volunteers contributing more than 20,000 hours every year to help patients and fundraising \$100,000 each year for hospital equipment. It is a popular avocation with retired seniors, who enjoy helping people and contributing to their community.

When the Auxiliary's operations were suspended in March 2020, the president elect, Maureen Webb, had little experience at SMMH although she had volunteered for many years at Oakville Trafalgar Hospital. On moving to Bracebridge she wanted to continue her auxiliarian involvement. Sworn in on July 6, 2021 and facing the reopening of four of the volunteer programs, the new president had her hands full. Webb and the volunteers had to be trained on how to use PPE and the Auxiliary duties had to be redefined.

An example of some of the services Auxiliary members perform include portering patients to and from day surgery, assisting patients in their rooms, delivering materials to the lab, running errands for nursing staff and generally helping staff and patients as needed.

On August 23, the coffeeshop reopened, a welcome service for staff, patients and visitors. Plans are underway to open the gift shop in the near future.

Webb has high praises for the volunteers, who are dedicated, helpful and community-minded. One is approaching 55 years with the Auxiliary, 12 have more than 20 years and 38 others have more than 10 years under their belts. New volunteers are always welcome. As services continue to re-open gradually, new recruits are carefully matched with tasks they enjoy the most and will have plenty of time to receive all training and preparation required.



*Any interested volunteers can
contact the SMMH Auxiliary at
705-645-4404, ext. 3338.*

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Muskoka Motor Rally *revs up fundraising and fun*

Three Lake Rosseau siblings on a mission raised \$1.2 million in two afternoons over two years, some of which was directed to the South Muskoka Memorial Hospital. The first afternoon was in August 2020, and the Wachsberg siblings, Jackie, 24, Daniel, 23 and Andrew, 18 put their heads together and decided to organize a car rally that circled their lake, created a fun afternoon and combatted Covid-19 by fundraising for emergency care.

Daniel, who developed the clues for the rally, said he and his family moved to the cottage last year to isolate and get out of the city. They continued to work, but had a lot of spare time on their hands. "We wanted to do something to combat Covid," said Daniel, "and our father is on a hospital board in Toronto, so we knew the importance of the emergency department at a hospital."



From left event organizer Jackie Wachsberg, Leah Walker of the South Muskoka Hospital Foundation, MAHC Emergency Department Physician Dr. Heather Sawula, MAHC Anaesthetist Dr. Derek Smith and event organizers Daniel and Andrew Wachsberg.

Event organizers and siblings Daniel, Jackie and Andrew Wachsberg



They knew the event had to be Covid friendly... so a car rally where small groups of people would be together yet isolated in their cars was ideal. Each team, with two to five members of their bubble, completed a scavenger hunt that tested their knowledge of the area. If you were asked what location in Muskoka represents "first a wrestler then an actor," would you be able to answer it? (Have you heard of the Rock golf course?) The siblings recruited friends to volunteer at the various checkpoints, and in doing so, introduced some young people to volunteerism.

"It means the world to us," said Daniel, "We raised awareness and helped others our age to understand that in being part of the community, it's important to give back."

Last year, the rally raised more than \$500,000 between corporate sponsors, team entries and a socially distanced silent auction for the emergency department (ED) at Toronto General Hospital. During this summer's event, a number of people suggested including their cottage hospital and so at the second annual Muskoka Motor Rally in July 2021, the proceeds were shared between the two hospitals. South Muskoka will receive funds to support equipment purchases in the ED such as patient monitors and pediatric cribs.

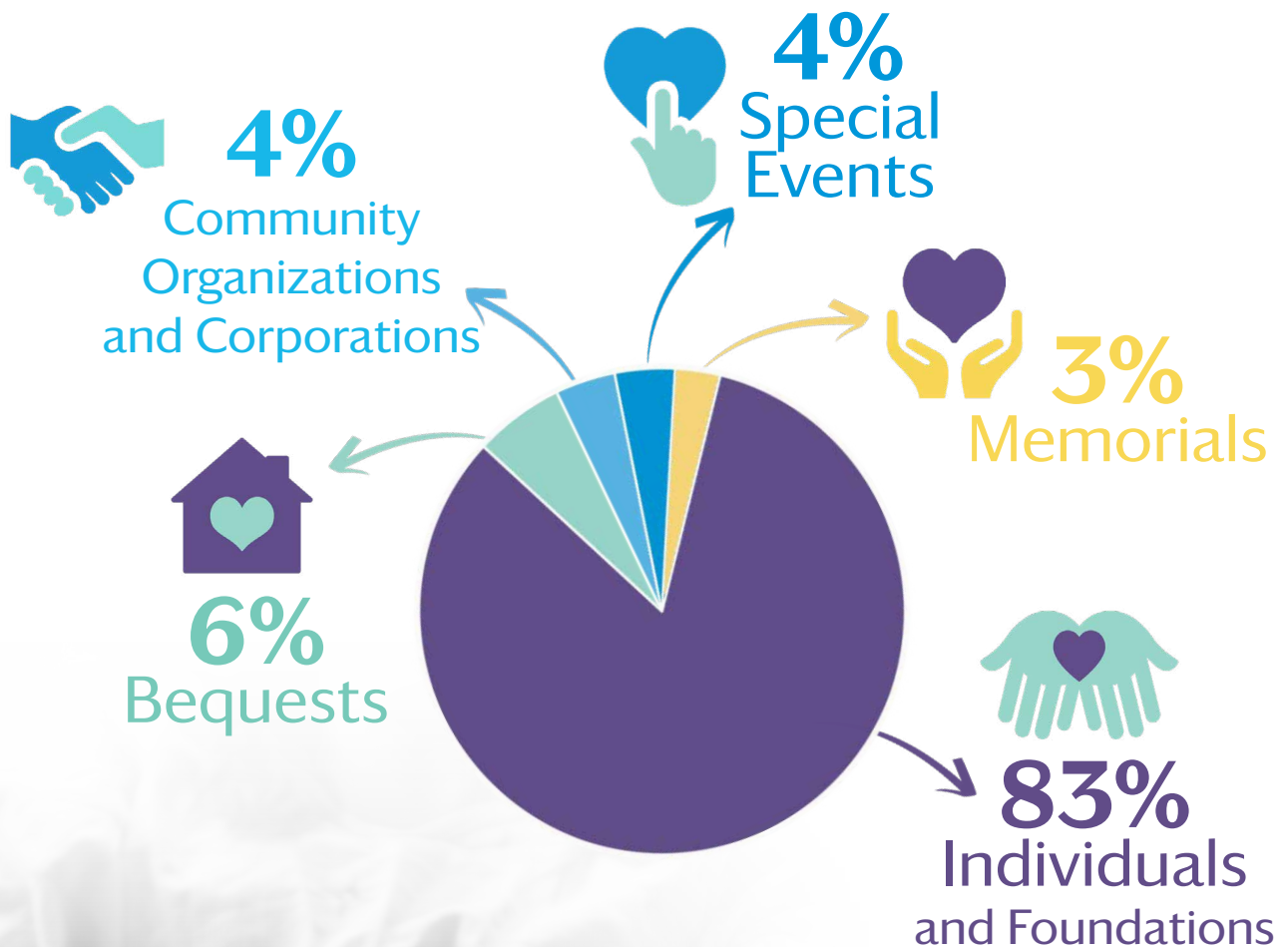
Will there be a third Muskoka Motor Rally? "Definitely," said the siblings who want to make the event annual. "Our hearts are in helping the community and making an impact," said Daniel.

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\$3,425,711

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Giving back community highlights



The Rotary Club of Bracebridge provided \$10,000 in support of urgently needed health care equipment.

Pictured: Bracebridge Rotary Past President, Brenda Rhodes and South Muskoka Hospital Foundation Executive Director, Colin Miller.

2021 marks the 35th consecutive year for the **Dave Ellis Pro-Am Annual Golf Tournament**. This year's event raised \$20,000 bringing the tournament's 35 year total to \$710,000 raised in support of the South Muskoka Hospital Foundation. *From left: Muskoka Lakes Golf and Country Club Pro Jordan Nathan, Tournament organizers Leslie Cleveland, Katie Doyle, Neil Paton, Lynne Ellis and Jen Stephen present cheque to South Muskoka Hospital Foundation Director of Annual Giving Leah Walker.*



our community



Bracebridge Tim Hortons owners Kevin & Laura Francis (right) present a \$5,000 cheque to Leah Walker of the South Muskoka Hospital Foundation. This is the first installment of the Francis family's \$25,000 pledge to the Foundation from their two Bracebridge Tim Hortons locations.

Tom Young (left) joins **Moose FM Radio** team AJ and Remy (centre) to accept a donation from Bracebridge Mayor Graydon Smith (right) during the 14th annual 99.5 Moose FM Radiothon. The Thanksgiving event raised \$128,865 to support renovations and new equipment for the hospital.



Patient Testimonial: BRENDA PATERSON



"On Monday morning climbing the stairs to my office left me feeling faint. I knew I needed help. A friend dropped everything and came running to my rescue to take me to South Muskoka Memorial Hospital. The staff in the emergency department were polite, friendly and professional. I was put on oxygen to help my breathing return to normal. After waiting for my negative COVID test, I was admitted and following several tests, I learned I had large clots in both my lungs causing the breathing problems. I was told that had I not reacted when I did, there could have been really severe and lasting complications. We are so blessed to have this wonderful hospital in our community. The nurses were attentive, compassionate and kind. Thank you, South Muskoka hospital staff for the deeply caring and thoroughly professional treatment."



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