

Physicians raise concerns about potential incinerator

Their concerns will be considered, says Mayor

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By Jennifer Stone

CLARINGTON -- Allowing a proposed incinerator to go ahead could lead to difficulties with both recruitment and retention of existing physicians, say a number of local doctors.

So concerned are they that some have attended council meetings and written letters to politicians. One has gone so far as to say he "will do everything in my power to stop" construction of the proposed incinerator.

But, Durham's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Robert Kyle, says until a site-specific risk assessment, taking into account factors such as technology and location, is completed, it's too soon to know what risk could be associated with building an energy-from-waste facility here.

Sixteen Clarington doctors, and 43 from across the Region, have signed petitions delineating their disapproval of a Durham-York proposal which would deal with residual waste via incineration. The recommended site for the project is located near Courtice Road and Hwy. 401.

Initially, the petition only went to Clarington doctors, said Dr. Debra Jefferson, a Newcastle-based family physician. But then, her practice partner, Dr. Aubrey Kassirer, offered to take it to a wider group of physicians, within Lakeridge Health.

"It was passed around at a meeting," said Dr. Jefferson. There "a selection of specialists" also signed their disapproval, she said.

Dr. Jefferson has spoken out at both local and regional council meetings about her disapproval of incineration and possible associated health impacts.

Like Dr. Jefferson, Dr. Benjamin Fuller, the chief and medical director of Emergency Medicine with Lakeridge Health Corporation, said he has "broad-based" concerns about the potential of siting an incinerator here. He has expressed his concerns to Clarington council in the form of a letter.

"I am definitely against the building and running of an incinerator in Durham as a means of dealing with our garbage and will do everything in my power to stop this endeavour," read the text of his letter.

He said he was shocked to hear of the proposal, and has myriad concerns.

First, he said, there are worries about the potential for greenhouse gasses to be emitted, and the amount of energy required simply to burn the residual waste.

The emergency doctor, who also has a practice in Bowmanville, said he's also concerned about the way this has been handled politically.

A recent trip to Germany left Dr. Fuller with a very different picture of the European view of incineration than Regional officials returned with, after an industry-led tour they participated

in. Politicians returned with stories of day cares next to incinerators, and neighbours comfortable with having waste-burning facilities nearby.

However, what Dr. Fuller said he saw was stories of inefficiencies, political problems, and one he's heard people here quote as "being inefficient ... being closed down ... and millions lost on it."

Many European doctors have been involved in protests against incineration, said Dr. Jefferson.

"Our politicians go to Europe and say everyone's happy ... but there is opposition to it, even in countries where (incineration is) really well-established," she said, noting it's far from "radical" for medical doctors to oppose incineration.

Dr. Fuller said he's also worried how building an incinerator here could impact recruitment -- a problem for Clarington, which finds itself with an estimated 17,000 residents who do not currently have a family doctor.

Drs. Elaine and Vincent Ho, both of whom practice in Bowmanville, have also stated concerns to Clarington council, in a letter.

In the letter, they urge council to "say 'no' to being the willing host for the incineration site.

"I am advocating not only on behalf of my own family, but also my own patients as well as the well-being of our whole community," said the letter, signed by both doctors. "Some of my friends have indicated that they may move because they do not want to take the health risk that they can potentially be exposed to if the incinerator is built.

"Our community certainly cannot afford to lose more family physicians. As you all know, they are extremely hard to recruit," said the letter.

Physician recruitment is the purview of the Clarington Board of Trade, said Mayor Jim Abernethy. But, he suggested doctors do more research before drawing conclusions.

"Before they jump the gun, they should make sure they understand the whole issue," he said. Still, "what they are saying has to be considered and will be considered."

So far, Michael Patrick, chairman of Clarington's Physician Recruitment Committee, said he hasn't heard from doctors considering coming to Clarington that they are concerned about the potential energy-from-waste facility.

But, "if existing doctors are concerned enough about it that they leave, we'll have to recruit more," he said.

Still, "in the last six months, I've met with six to eight young potential recruits and the issue hasn't come up a single time."

The Region's Medical Officer of Health said he has gone to great lengths to ensure a recently-released Generic Human Health Risk Assessment was done properly. That document -- which Dr. Kyle said he had an expert review to ensure it covered all the bases -- concluded risks associated with building an incinerator would be limited. A more site-specific risk assessment is also being undertaken, and will look at specifics of site, technology and other factors, said Dr. Kyle.

"Let's see what it has to say before we decide what the risks are," he said, noting the Environment Ministry wouldn't allow the project to go ahead without mitigating any associated health risks.

But, Dr. Fuller said he's still concerned.

"Our job as physicians is to look at what's best for our patients and the community ... our heart and soul is in this community," he said. "If I see something that's going to damage it, I'm going to say something about it."