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Optometrists should return to negotiations

Ontario's eye care patients have been held hostage for too long

EVERY day in Ontario for the past two months, thousands of people who need eye exams have been denied them. Kids are going to school without prescriptions for eyeglasses. Seniors aren't being screened for potentially serious conditions like cataracts.

It's one thing to have this important service interrupted for a few days, or even a couple of weeks, as the province's optometrists and the government haggle over what amounts to fair payment for eye exams. But the optometrists withdrew services to people covered by OHIP on Sept. 1, and nine weeks later there's no end in sight to their dispute with the government.

This can't go on.

About 650,000 people in Ontario — young people under the age of 20, seniors aged 65 and up, and some others with specific eye conditions — are being effectively held hostage while the two sides can't even figure out a way to talk to each other.

OTHER VIEWS Kids, teens and older people are covered by OHIP for annual eye exams for a good reason. We care about kids' health and we want to make sure they get proper eye care. And seniors are most at risk for conditions like cataracts and macular degeneration, which can end in blindness.

Right now they're caught in a classic bind. They can't get an OHIP-covered appointment and they can't pay privately for an exam, even if they want to and can afford it. That's against the rules.

We all know how this is going to end — eventually. Both sides agree the fee the optometrists get for OHIP-covered eye exams (\$44) doesn't cover the full cost, which the optometrists say is in the range of \$75 to \$80 when things like rent and equipment are figured in.

Sooner or later they'll come up with a way to close that gap. The government will agree to pay the optometrists more than it would like, on a faster schedule than it would like. The optometrists will agree to accept less than they'd ideally like now, in return for a plan to catch up.

That's what negotiations are all about. Nobody gets everything they want, at least not right away.

But at the moment there aren't any negotiations. The two sides tried mediation in August, but that has broken down completely.

The government made an offer that includes an increase of 8.48 per cent this year for OHIP exams, plus a lump-sum payment of \$39 million to start compensating optometrists for past losses. But the Ontario Association of Optometrists rejected that as a publicity stunt. It's refusing an invitation from the mediator (which it chose) to return to the table.

As we said, sooner or later they'll figure out a way forward. But it matters a lot whether this happens sooner — or later.

Later will mean more kids and teens who don't get timely eye care. It will mean more seniors whose potentially blinding conditions aren't diagnosed or treated. Every week this drags puts the vision of thousands more Ontarians at risk.

The pandemic has already resulted in hundreds of thousands of lost or delayed eye procedures. The organization Fighting Blindness Canada says eye surgeries dropped by 47 per cent during the early stages of COVID, and more than 1,400 Canadians lost vision.

Ontario's optometrists need to stop their job action now and put the health of patients first. They should go back to the bargaining table and the government should meet them there and work out a deal both sides can live with. It's time to call this off.

— An editorial from the *Toronto Star* (thestar.com)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Armed Forces serve peace, security

THE Armistice of Nov. 11, 1918, commemorated each year on Remembrance Day, ended the hostilities of a conflict that claimed more than 40 million lives. More than 600,000 people served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force to serve peace around the world. On Nov. 11, we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the idea of a safer Canada, and thank those currently serving to protect Canada, and support peace, safety and security around the world.

Almost as many Canadian Armed Forces operations are happening here at home as abroad: responding to forest fires, floods, and other natural disasters; preventing avalanches in British Columbia; watching for illegal marine poaching; and of course, providing critical Canadian Armed Forces support in First Nations, long-term care homes, and at borders throughout the pandemic. Of special note is the work of the military to support the Public Health Agency of Canada to deliver millions of vaccines across the country — ensuring people

could be vaccinated quickly and safely, no matter where they lived.

Anyone with friends or loved ones that serve in the Armed Forces can attest to the bravery and sacrifice of the Canadians sent far from home, standing ready to protect.

Those abroad, in Latvia, Ukraine, Cyrus, Iraq, South Sudan, the Congo — they are serving peace, stability, diplomacy, and offering humanitarian assistance in regions experiencing or at risk of conflict and strife.

It is not by accident that Canada is a safe and prosperous nation. We're a nation of nations that trust each other because we can — because we enjoy a peace and stability that underpins our trust in each other. The hard-working people in our military continue to serve their country, often at a deep personal cost. So join me, on Nov. 11 and every day, to recognize, thank, and remember those who serve. We are grateful.

Patty Hajdu

MP for Thunder Bay-Superior North



Our stories can change lives

BY INGRID GREEN

THE She Is Wise magazine is a platform for Indigenous women voices. These are voices that make a difference in families and communities across the nation. The inception of the biannual magazine came from the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) communications manager Andre Morriveau, a member of Fort William First Nation who believes wholeheartedly in changing the narrative of Indigenous women's stories.

ONWA recognized the importance of storytelling from Indigenous women's perspectives and the need to broaden our approach to doing it. ONWA knows that through our stories we can affect change in the lives of Indigenous women and girls, and that is the objective of this magazine.

The She Is Wise magazine is an Indigenous women's magazine that is written for and developed by Indigenous women that reflects Indigenous women's lives and experiences. These stories are medicine and in gathering these stories to share, we know that each story is going to impact someone who needs to hear it. We know that someone is going to heal from it. We know that someone is going to grow from it.

The power of stories is that they make us stronger in both the telling and the listening. Storytelling in the She Is Wise magazine is an act of resurgence for Indigenous women. It is in the process of sharing and listening that we learn that healing cannot happen in isolation. Stories are medicine, they change us and heal our hearts.

ONWA is honoured to work on issues that impact Indigenous women, and the magazine is reflection of the work we do as the largest and oldest Indigenous women's organization in Canada. Each magazine has a theme and those presented in each speak to their successes and how



ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

She Is Wise magazine helps Indigenous women share

they too have struggled with the hard issues that affect Indigenous women's lives. They share their experiences to help others find their way and that is what makes this magazine so beautiful.

The She Is Wise magazine reflects who we are at the Ontario Native Women's Association as are



an organization. In it, we highlight the relationships and work that are happening in Canada that guide our work.

It is our goal that Indigenous women and girls can look outside of themselves to see their experiences truthfully reflected. We know that many Canadians have stereotypical images of who Indigenous women are and we need to change that. We need people to see us as we are — strong and indigenously beautiful. Our stories are stories of passion and commitment, Indigenous women as leaders, as matriarchs, as we once were and as who we are today. We can and will speak for ourselves and make the change needed in our communities for ourselves and for our children's children.

This year, we celebrate ONWA's 50th anniversary. The fifth edition of She Is Wise Magazine shares strong women stories of what leadership is from our perspective, through our lens. This issue honours Indigenous women's voices and stories to change the narrative of our lives. We are the warriors, the leaders and the healers that we have been waiting for.

The ONWA is a membership organization with service delivery sites and membership organizations located throughout the province of Ontario.

For more information, please see our website at www.onwa.ca.

Ingrid Green is the director of community development and is the contributing editor of the Ontario Native Women's Association's She Is Wise Magazine. Ingrid has been living in Thunder Bay since 2002 and is originally from Kenora. She is a graduate of Lakehead University and holds an honours degree in Indigenous learning with a minor in women's studies. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.

Ford not helping working poor

BY DAN OLDFIELD

SO, THE Ontario Conservative government has announced it is increasing the province's minimum wage to \$15 an hour as of Jan. 1, 2022. Is this some sort of major philosophical change?

The simple answer is no. This should in no way be mistaken as the government finally coming to its senses and doing the right thing. It can only be seen for what it is, as a cynical and desperate attempt to win votes this coming June. No one who has been paying any attention will forget that this increase was supposed to happen two years ago but the Ford government killed it. It also killed the pilot project on universal basic income, but that's an issue for another day.

This is not a government attempting to address the issues of the working poor or a living wage. This is a government that has been told by its business community constituency, the only community it really cares about, that it can't hire or keep employees in the current market place and it is being forced to increase wages.

It truly is an odd thing to watch the business community wrestling with this issue. The same community that sings the praises of the free-market economy is now moaning about workers taking advantage of the basic free-market philosophy of supply



GUEST COLUMN

and demand.

What we see is a government that has never shown any interest in addressing critical social issues now faking leadership on these issues. Having accepted the obvious reality of increasing labour costs, the Ford administration is now using these economic realities to pretend to care about working people.

The \$15 an hour campaign which began more than five years ago is now sadly out of date. Nowhere in Ontario is \$15 an hour considered a living wage. The latest figures from the Ontario Living Wage Network suggest that a minimum living wage for a single person in Thunder Bay is \$16.20 an hour. That is based on a 40-hour work week which is a rare commodity these days and covers just the basics of food, shelter and does not include such things as home ownership, retirement, savings, savings for children's education or any debt repayment.

The fundamental reason to work in the first place is to pro-

vide enough money to cover food and shelter and a few other necessities of life. If working doesn't provide that, it should not surprise anyone when people will opt out of that system.

Every time there's any discussion about creating a living wage, we hear the same fear mongering from the same business-friendly institutions. They warn of all sorts of doom and gloom, of businesses going under and of the \$45 hamburger. Yet in places where the minimum wage is much higher we simply don't see those dark predictions play out.

The world of work is changing before our eyes as the distribution of wealth continues to grossly favour the haves over the have-nots. The pace of the change has no doubt been exacerbated by the pandemic, but there can be little doubt that fundamental change is taking place.

Business, government, unions and other stakeholders will have to quickly decide whether they're going to fight the inevitable tide of change or be a productive contributor to it. Playing politics with minimum wage rates is not the answer.

Dan Oldfield is a former CBC reporter and lead negotiator for the Canadian Media Guild and currently a partner in Syzygy Learning and Facilitation. He has a home in the Thunder Bay area.