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Letters to the editor

Waterford Hospital has outlived its usefulness

Gerri Earles

I write regarding a story in the July 7 edition of The Telegram, headlined "Waterford tour leaves 'ugly' impression."

It concerned a tour of the Waterford Hospital in St. John's by Geoff Chaulk, executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Bravo, bravo for Geoff.

Tour usually implies you are going to see something positive. To quote him on the impression he had, it was "ugly." I think Chaulk was too kind. Three years ago, I had the misfortune of having two members of my family stay at the Waterford. What I witnessed was archaic and dehumanizing.

Not the correct solution

We, as a society, think it is right to take another part of our society, the mentally ill, segregate them, put them in a building that was built in the 1800s, lock them up and pat ourselves on the back and think that is OK.

Throughout history segregation has never worked. We have to stop treating our mothers, brothers, children, etc. as convicts, because that is the message we send them every time we lock them away in this building.

If someone needs an appendectomy, then they will go to St. Clare's or the Health Sciences. When one needs help with depression or other psychiatric problems, then they are doomed to the Waterford.

To say this is the best we have is not good enough. To say

we have come a long way in treating the mentally ill is farcical. All one has to do is step inside the geriatric ward or acute unit to see how far we need to go. The first thing that hits you is the stench, unwashed bodies, dirty clothes and no ventilation system. There is no buzzer system there, overcrowded rooms, barred windows and, worst of all, patients wandering around with nothing to do.

What is the solution? Tear down the Waterford.

Some changes that should be implemented include:

Division managers who have offices outside the unit need to be moved back onto the wards where everything is happening. They should definitely make themselves more accessible to patients and patients' families.

The nursing stations where the computers have taken over need to be eliminated. The staff needs to be part of the unit, not locked away from patients. I witnessed very little interaction of staff with patients.

Privacy at the Waterford is non-existent. Would a doctor at the Health Sciences discuss a patient's history in front of visitors, other patients and who knows who else? A curtain doesn't allow privacy.

Let them help

If a patient's family wants to provide care with meals, baths, etc., do not treat them as the enemy. They are concerned, want to help, but most of all want to have peace of mind in a very stressful situation.

There is not a time when I pass the Waterford that I don't get a knot in my stomach. Are we doing enough? I think not. Remember, a building is only as good as its foundation.

This building has to go. Let's create a site that is on par with other hospitals in Eastern Health It's a big order to fill. Let's start now.

Chaulk's comments inspired me to write this letter. Three years ago, I sent a similar letter to the minister of Health and

managers in the Health Care Corp. But, as you can see, the frustration of this situation is as emotional as it was three years ago. Hopefully, this time something will be done.

Gerri Earles writes from Mount Pearl.

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