



## Provincial Election 2007



### Safe Needles Save Lives

Ontario law does not make the provision of safety-engineered needles mandatory for health care workers, leading to thousands of needless needlestick injuries a year. NDP MPP Shelley Martel's Bill 30, making this provision mandatory, languished at a Legislative Standing Committee for months and died when the Liberal government prorogued the Legislature early in June. On the one hand, the government has said health and safety is an important issue for them. On the other, they have failed to act to protect workers from these preventable injuries.

Health Care unions say "voluntary" compliance is not realistic. As long as current laws allow employers to use cheaper, less-safe conventional devices, experience has proven that they will continue to do so in order to save the few pennies per device – with tragic consequences for worker health and safety. Simply expecting that individual employers will spend a little more for such superior devices – because "it's the right thing to do" – is naive and futile. That's why only ten to twenty percent of all devices used in Ontario workplaces are currently the superior safety-engineered version. That's why over 33,000 needlestick injuries are still occurring in this province every year.

The US, Saskatchewan and Manitoba governments have recognized this indisputable fact and in response to this inescapable reality, passed laws requiring the mandatory use of safety-engineered needles in workplaces. In the first year alone, the US saw a dramatic drop of needlestick injuries by 51%, even though full compliance was being phased-in over a number of years!

Converting to engineered medical devices would cost about \$22 million, yet the Ontario government spends \$32 million each year testing for and treating needlestick injuries suffered by health care workers. By preventing just 80% of the 17,000 needlestick injuries suffered by Ontario acute care workers each year, the government would not only save lives, but would also free-up nearly 4 million of existing health care dollars, which could be applied instead to priority areas like reducing waiting lists or hiring more health care workers.

The government would realize even greater cost savings down the road. Once full conversion takes place, in all health care settings including long-term care and home care, the savings would be in excess of \$25 million per year.

Workers who suffer a needlestick injury must undergo a living hell for six months to a year to determine if they have contracted a potentially deadly disease like HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis B or C. All the while, they live in fear of infecting friends and family members. Workers often must subject themselves to harsh drug therapy to try to ward off some of those diseases, which are both painful and costly and can cause serious side effects.

These injuries can and must be prevented in the first place. The technology exists and the regulation works.

Used needles in our communities are a terrifying concept. And it is truly remarkable how used needles threaten workers. Union members have found needles in dietary trays, bed linens and waste baskets. Postal workers often find them in mailboxes. Security guards at the airports stick themselves when checking luggage. Firefighters are exposed when putting out flames in abandoned buildings and crack houses. Transit workers find them in buses. Our waste management workers find them in trash bins and garbage bags. Outside workers find them in parks and playgrounds every day.

Our children are not safe until we can eliminate the threat conventional needles pose. An accidental needlestick injury can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time – at work, in parks, playgrounds, schoolyards.

The government has ignored letters from health care unions on the subject of safe needlesticks and ignored repeated appeals for legislation on safety-engineered needlesticks from health care unions at the Minister of Labour's Health and Safety Action Group.

**Ask your Local Candidates:**

Do you support legislation to make the provision of safety-engineered needles mandatory for health care workers?