

# Paramedics suited to withstand SARS

New uniforms could frighten unsuspecting public at first

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## WATERLOO REGION

They might look like invaders from outer space, but under those yellow gowns and green masks are hot, uncomfortable paramedics trying to do their job.

"Our fear is that the community will see these guys at an emergency and panic," said John Prno, director of ambulance services for Waterloo Region.

The province ordered the full-body coverage to protect emergency service workers, including paramedics and firefighters, from possible exposure to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

The pneumonia-like condition has already killed seven people in the province and sent nearly 140 probable or suspected cases into quarantine.

Prno said he's most concerned about tomorrow's Elmira Maple Syrup Festival, an annual event that regularly draws 10,000 visitors to the town, many from Toronto.

"We usually get six or seven (emergency) calls," he said. The first time a crew member jumps out of the ambulance, people are going to go crazy."

He hopes the public understands there are no suspected cases of SARS in Waterloo Region. The service is simply responding to a provincially mandated guidelines to prevent further



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Paramedic Amanda Finch, 21, of Waterloo will wear protective gear for some calls as a precaution against exposure to SARS.

spreading of the infection.

Paramedics will don the new uniforms when a patient's symptoms fit certain criteria, such as respiratory problems or a cluster of symptoms such as headache, malaise and muscle pain. Also on the alert list is anyone who has been in Scarborough Grace Hospital (the centre of the Ontario outbreak), or recently returned from Asia.

If the call does not fit any of the criteria, paramedics will still wear the uniform before bringing the patient into the emergency department.

"I'm nervous about (SARS)," said paramedic, Amanda Finch. "I follow all the precautions because I don't want to take it home to my family if I come in contact with it. We haven't seen any yet, but we're prepared."

At the Waterloo fire department, platoon chief Chris Collins said firefighters will wear masks, but only if they determine there could be a risk after they arrive at an emergency.

"We're going to minimize exposure as much as we can," he said. "We're not trying to cause panic."

The masks, which cost about \$1.20 each, are rated to filter out 95 per cent of airborne bacteria — considerably more than the masks normally worn by emergency and hospital workers.

Prno said he also ordered 600 protective gowns.

"We might not use, in a normal year, 30 gowns," he said. "We figure these gowns will last us about three weeks."

The reason for the high volume is the largest percentage of their calls involve respiratory problems such as bronchitis, emphysema and asthma, all

which match criteria for possible SARS infection.

As for the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival's organizers, they're not too worried about the SARS outbreak affecting numbers. Co-chairwoman Ellen Helps said her group discussed what actions could be taken, given the public's concern, but felt confident the provincial Health Ministry had everything under control.

"We have hand washing stations and we're encouraging everyone to use them."

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