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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Saskatchewan | 25e | 3e | Discours sur la santé | 11 avril 2007 | Leonard W. Taylor | Minister of Health | Saskatchewan New Democratic Party |

Thank you very much. I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to present the Department of Health’s estimates and to answer any questions about the department’s plans for the coming fiscal year or the current fiscal year. So yes, I will introduce the department senior staff who have been hands-on with the creation of our ’07-08 plans and will assist in helping me to answer any questions that you might have.

On my far left is assistant deputy minister, Max Hendricks; on my immediate left, assistant deputy minister, Lauren Donnelly; and on my right, deputy minister, John Wright. Seated just behind me are Roger Carriere, executive director of the community care branch; Dr. Louise Greenberg, associate deputy minister; and Rod Wiley, executive director of the regional accountability and regional policy branches.

Also in attendance here are Bonnie Blakley, executive director, workforce planning branch; Deb Jordan, executive director, acute and emergency services branch; Ted Warawa, executive director, finance and administration branch; Jeannette Low, director, finance and administration; Tracey Smith, assistant to the deputy minister, and Jill Raddysh who is working as an intern in the deputy minister’s office as part of her studies for a master’s of public administration degree.

As you know the Department of Health is divided with two ministers. The Hon. Graham Addley, Minister of Healthy Living Services, will appear before the committee on another day to present the estimates for his portfolio, Healthy Living Services and Seniors. The cost of those programs are included in the totals of the Health department, but I will leave it to Minister Addley to provide more detailed information and to answer questions on the Premier’s Project Hope, and other Healthy Living programs and services.

Saskatchewan’s Health ’07-08 budget and performance plan provide a clear picture of the department’s priorities. We continue to follow the blueprint laid out in The Action Plan for Saskatchewan Health Care. Our top priority is to ensure that quality health care is within our financial means and be readily available today and into the future for Saskatchewan people.

This year’s Health budget has increased by $274 million or 8.6 per cent from the previous year to a total of $3.46 billion. The average increase over the last five years has been 7.6 per cent. This additional funding allows us to focus on the most immediate issues in the health care system while making investments for the future.

Priorities in this year’s budget and performance plan include continuing to improve access and reduce wait times; protecting, promoting, and improving the health of our children and youth; advancing health workforce planning; ensuring the required technology and capital infrastructure are in place to support the health system’s core businesses; and supporting our seniors, Aboriginal peoples, and vulnerable workers.

We are building on some notable accomplishments in the ’06-07 year. Saskatchewan Health worked with health regions and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency and many other groups representing health professionals, health workers, communities, residents, and our partners at the provincial, territorial, and federal levels.

We made progress on access and wait times with a replacement MRI [magnetic resonance imaging] announced for Royal University Hospital and a new MRI for St. Paul’s Hospital, Project Hope, funding for two new air ambulance aircraft, and reductions in wait lists and wait times for surgeries and MRIs.

The health system made progress on health worker recruitment and retention with a new recruitment agency; grants and relocation to Saskatchewan or recruitment to rural, northern, and hard-to-recruit positions; expanded clinical placement capacity; and an employee retention program to help health employees working in the system.

To improve primary health care, Health added crisis support to the 24-hour HealthLine service and added online access to health information. Midwifery legislation was proclaimed in February, and two midwives from Saskatchewan received bursaries for training towards accreditation.

Another area of progress was in information systems for health care. We moved forward our vision for e-health with the introduction of an integrated system for in-hospital patient care, access to patient prescription information by health professionals, and the beginnings of a system to digitally store and share diagnostic information across the province.

These are just a few of the successes we had in the fiscal year just ended. Saskatchewan Health will build on those successes. Although much work and effort will go into maintaining and improving existing programs and services within existing budget, I will focus my comments on new funding and new initiatives as we look at the ’07-08 budget year.

The total budget increase of $274 million in ’07-08 equips the health system to maintain service levels and make improvements in several key areas. Fifty-four per cent of the new funding, or $148 million, will pay for increased compensation for health workers, professionals, and government employees, or for the compensation costs of new initiatives. Thirty-eight per cent, or $86 million, will pay for increases in the cost of drugs and medical and surgical supplies.

Six million dollars will go to investments in information technology and the electronic health record. I should point out that the cost of our e-health initiatives will be partially offset by reductions in health region facility funding as the storage and transfer of files changes from manual to digital. We will use those investments to attract more than $11 million in additional funding from Canada Health Infoway in ’07-08. The remaining 13 per cent of the new money, or $36 million, will cover increased operating costs to allow for improvements in the air ambulance program, the senior citizens’ ambulance assistance program, out-of-province medical services, and various extended benefit programs.

We want to look at the highlights in front of us. We recognize the province’s diverse health needs with $36 million to fund a new seniors’ prescription drug plan that caps costs at $15 per prescription. We are also accessing the federal Aboriginal Health Transition Fund for $2.5 million to adapt existing health programs to better meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples.

We will also be improving health benefits for vulnerable workers by providing supplementary eye coverage and enhanced prescription drug coverage for up to 30,000 low-income workers. We will improve access and wait times with $6 million of new funding for 160 additional hip and knee surgeries, 3,000 more MRI scans, and a 35 per cent increase in the number of bone mineral density tests.

We are investing in children’s health with $5 million in enhancement that includes better mental health and rehabilitation services, funding for the treatment of children with autism, a respite program for families of children with complex medical care needs, expansion of our benefit plans to subsidize the cost of insulin pumps and supplies for children and youth under 18 years of age, and a targeted dental sealant program to prevent cavities and improve the dental health of at risk children.

The budget includes $77 million in health capital spending, including work on the Regina General Hospital maternal and newborn care centre, health facilities in Maidstone, Preeceville, Moosomin, Ile-a-la-Crosse, Humboldt and elsewhere. The budget includes an additional $5 million for the Saskatchewan Disease Control Laboratory, and $1 million to fund planning for the Saskatchewan Hospital North Battleford replacement.

The government relies on health regions and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency to deliver the bulk of direct care in the province. Funding to health regions is increasing by 6.4 per cent to maintain and improve important services across Saskatchewan. The allocation to the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency will increase 7.3 per cent to meet increasing demand for diagnostic services and treatments, including newly approved drug treatments.

This has been an overview of some of the highlights from the Department of Health’s 2007-2008 budget. I am here with department senior staff to answer any questions or provide any additional detail about the budget, the programs, and services planned for this year. I am in your hands, Madam Chair.