

Case Study: Building Trust in the C-Suite

*A calculated risk in transparency,
five years after the pandemic.*

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Public Relations & Digital Media*



William Osler
Health System



Why does this case matter?

- Trust in health care is fragile
- Canadian general public (and government) hold health care as a top priority
- Crises are constant and have a lingering effect
- Transparency now carries reputational risk *and* reputational value



Context for a UK audience – who are we?

William Osler Health System

- One of the largest hospital systems in Canada
 - 5 Sites
 - 3 Hospitals
 - 2 Emergency Departments (+1 being built)
 - 1 large Urgent Care Centre
- Serves a fast growing and diverse suburban population of more than 1.3M people
- Large newcomer and racialized communities with multigenerational households
- High prevalence of chronic disease
- Among the busiest emergency departments in Canada



Osler's role during the pandemic

- At the epicentre of Ontario's COVID-19 response
- Communities served by Osler had some of the highest COVID-19 positivity rates in the country
- Intensive Care Units and Emergency Departments were at capacity
- High volume of intra-hospital patient transfers
- Took lead role with large-scale vaccination clinics alongside community partners



Media Ask & CBC's Objective



- **Show a day in the life of an Emergency Department exactly 5 years post-pandemic**
- Highlight pressures, leadership, and innovation
- Humanize staff and patient experiences
- CBC Metro Morning (Toronto region radio)
- Live broadcast from Osler's Brampton Civic Hospital
- 3:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. on site
- Live show from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.

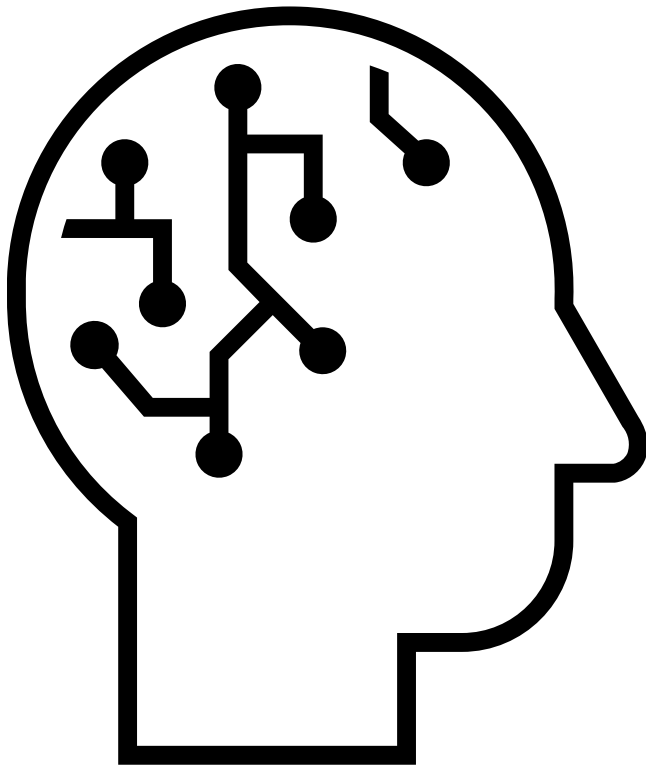
Why was this high risk?

- Live broadcast – well known, high listenership, high stakes discussions
- Unpredictable Emergency Department environment
- Overcrowding and hallway medicine
- Patient privacy and consent
- Staff fatigue and emotion



The Leadership Question

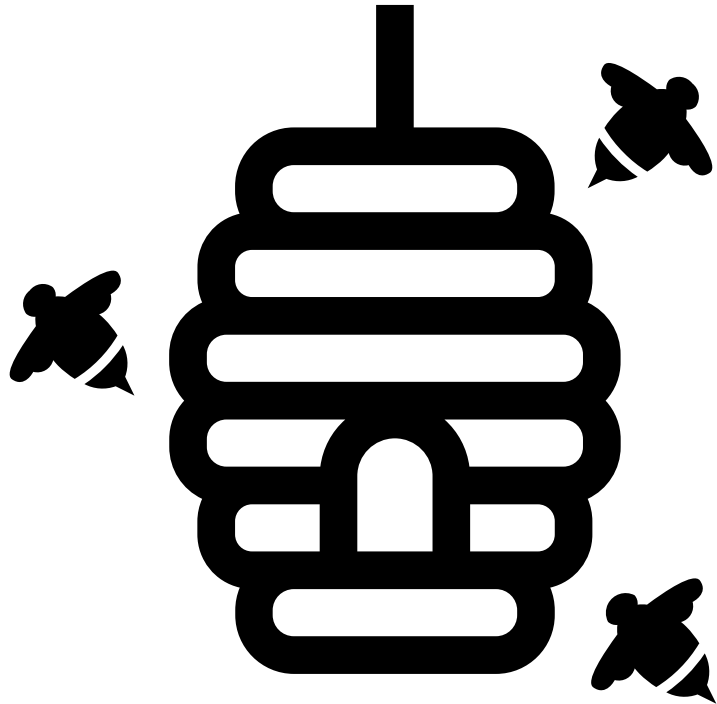
The real decision was not about media.



- It was about:
 - Values
 - Confidence in staff & physicians
 - Openness & transparency
- This is where communications either has a seat at the table or it doesn't.
- **“Communications”** role was to present the pros and cons and help leaders *decide whether to participate*, not persuade them emotionally.



Reframing risk for the C Suite



- What story is told if we say no?
- Are we willing to stand behind our people?
- Impact on morale for our staff, physicians, medical learners, volunteers.
- **Does this story align with who we say we are?**

Building internal trust through process

- Cross-functional organization-wide working group
- Clear governance and leadership by the communications team
- Shared ownership of risk and shared reward



Boundaries with the media

- Restricted access areas
- No direct approach to patients or staff
- Consent from everyone recorded
- PR present at all times with ability to step in



Preparing people, not scripts

- Nurses
 - Physicians
 - Clinical leaders
 - Executives
-
- We did not script answers
 - **We prepared people** for difficult, human questions
 - **Authenticity** was the strategy



March 19, 2025

The day of the live broadcast

- CBC were on site before dawn
- Live interviews across radio and TV
- PR embedded throughout
- This required real-time decision-making
- Calm, visible communications leadership mattered
- We brought viewers along with us through our [social channels](#)

Outcomes

- Positive staff & physician feedback
- Boost for staff & physician morale
- No privacy breaches or complaints
- Balanced, credible coverage
- 26 media clips
- Total reach: 23.5M

The screenshot shows the CBC News website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with 'Menu', 'Search', and 'Sign In'. Below this is a red banner with 'NEWS' and various category links: 'Top Stories', 'Local', 'Climate', 'World', 'Canada', 'Politics', 'Indigenous', 'Business', 'The National', and a 'More' dropdown. A 'VIDEO' section is active, showing a video player with a thumbnail of a woman speaking. Below the video player is the article title 'How this hospital executive's battle with cancer has changed her opinion on Brampton's health care' and a timestamp 'March 19, 2025 | 9:38'. To the right of the main article are sections for 'More Like This' and 'Recommended for You', each featuring video thumbnails and titles. An advertisement for '14C HomePod Health' is also visible.

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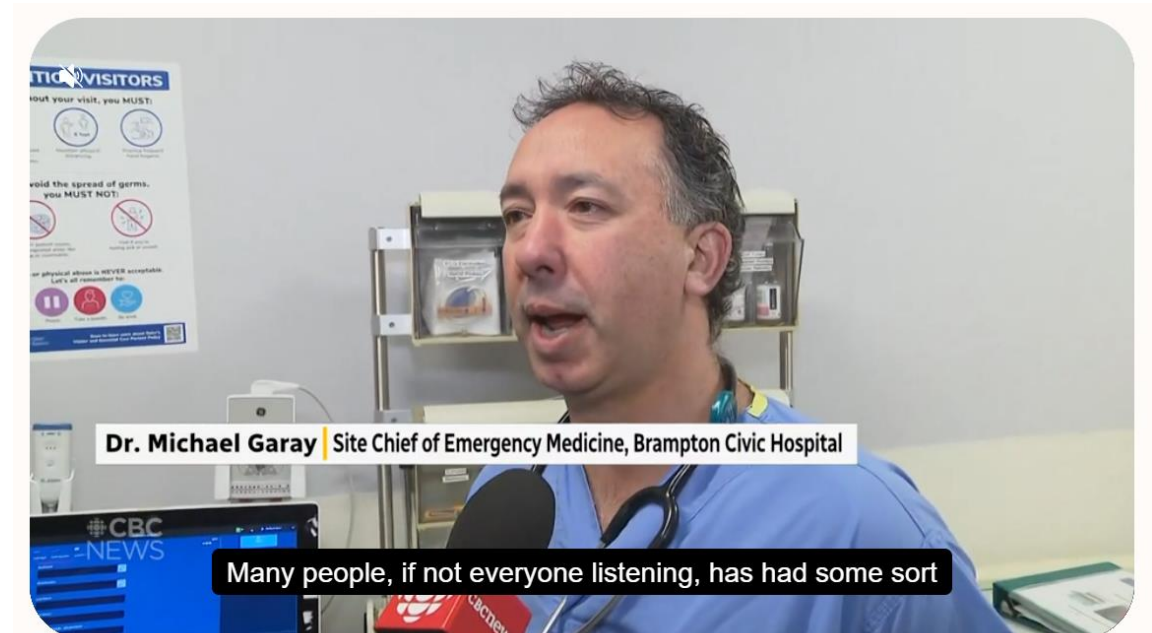
3 Hours Ago

Mark Carney hugs Heated Rivalry star

January 29

Trump threatens to tariff, 'decertify' Canadian aircraft in escalating dispute

1 Hour Ago



Key take aways for crisis communicators

- Planning, preparing & extensive review
- Credibility over control
- Systems enabled transparency
- Issues mitigation strategies
- Commitment to the plan & collaboration
- Trust must be established in advance - **before a crisis tests it**





Transparency is a choice.

**If you say you trust your people, show it
If you say you serve the public, let them see the work in
action**

If you say you've learned from crisis, act on it