

# Case Study: Building Trust in the C-Suite

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

Presented by: *Emma Johnston, Director,  
Public Relations & Digital Media*

# 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.



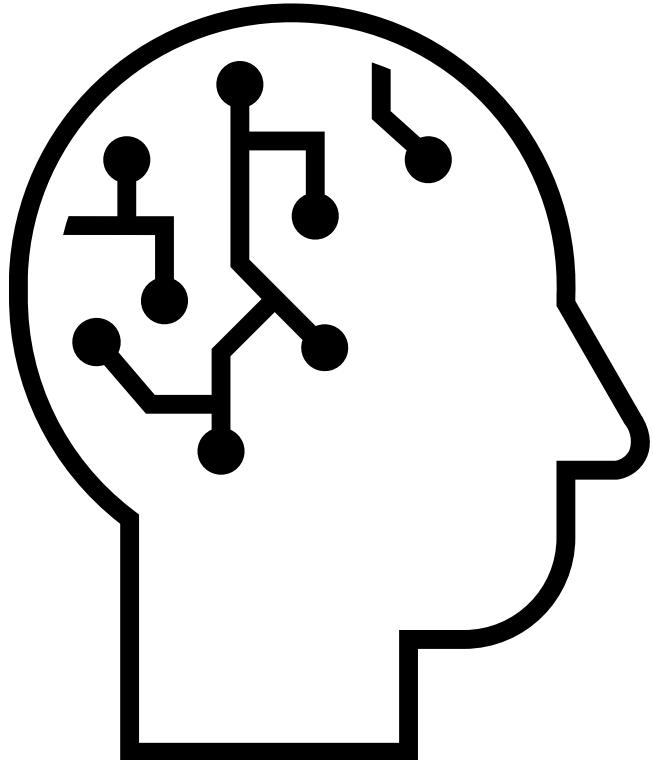
# *Why was this high risk?*

- 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

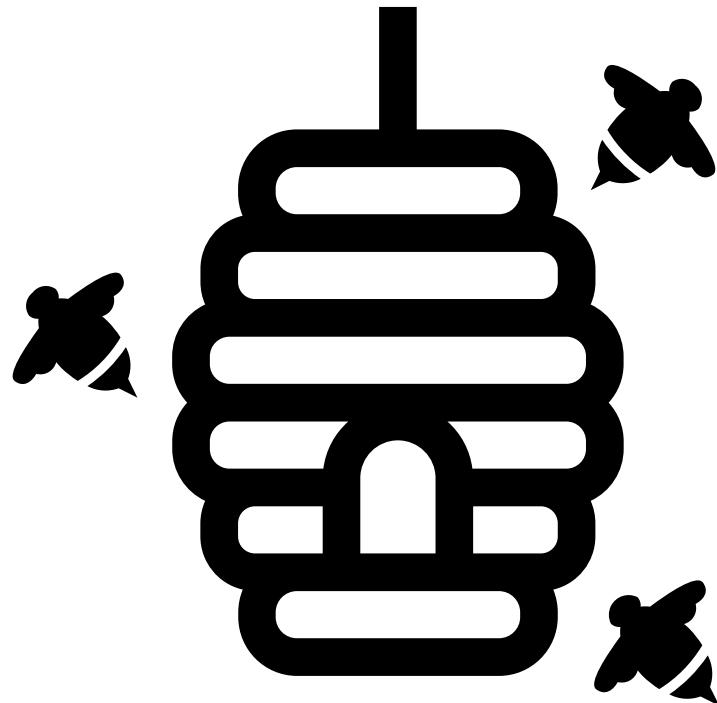
The real decision was not about media.



- 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

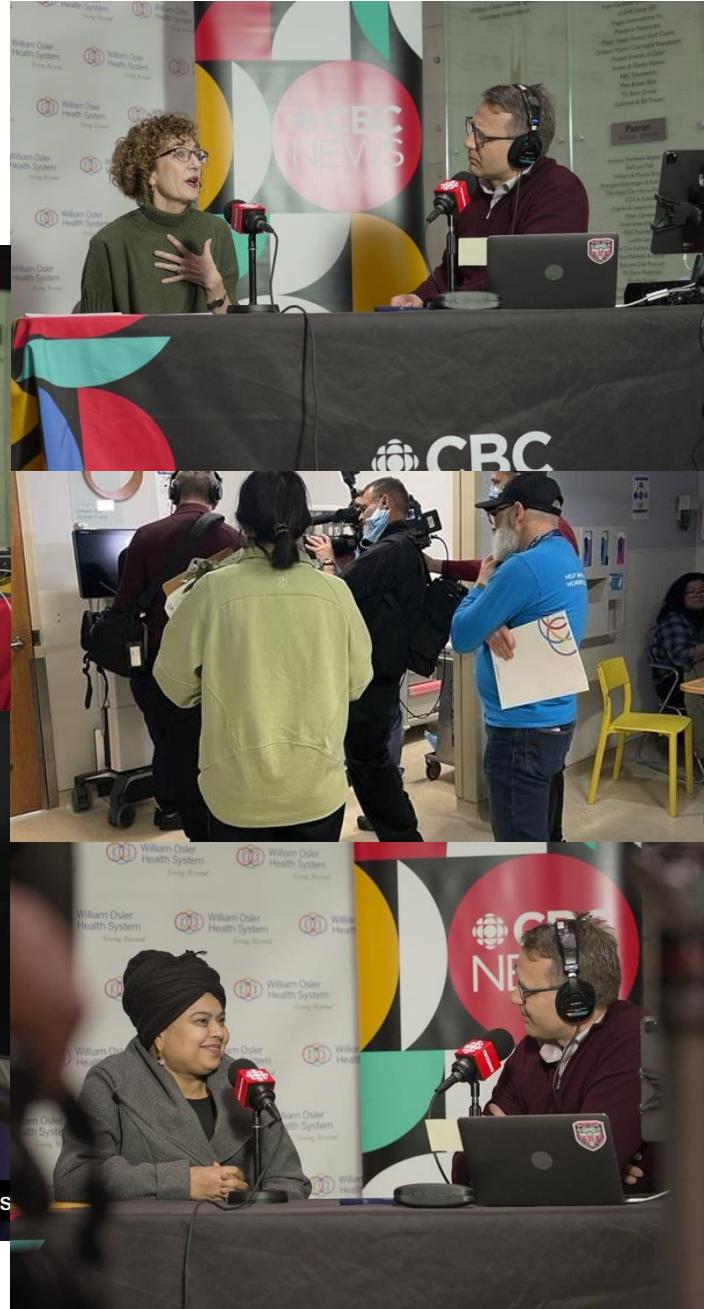
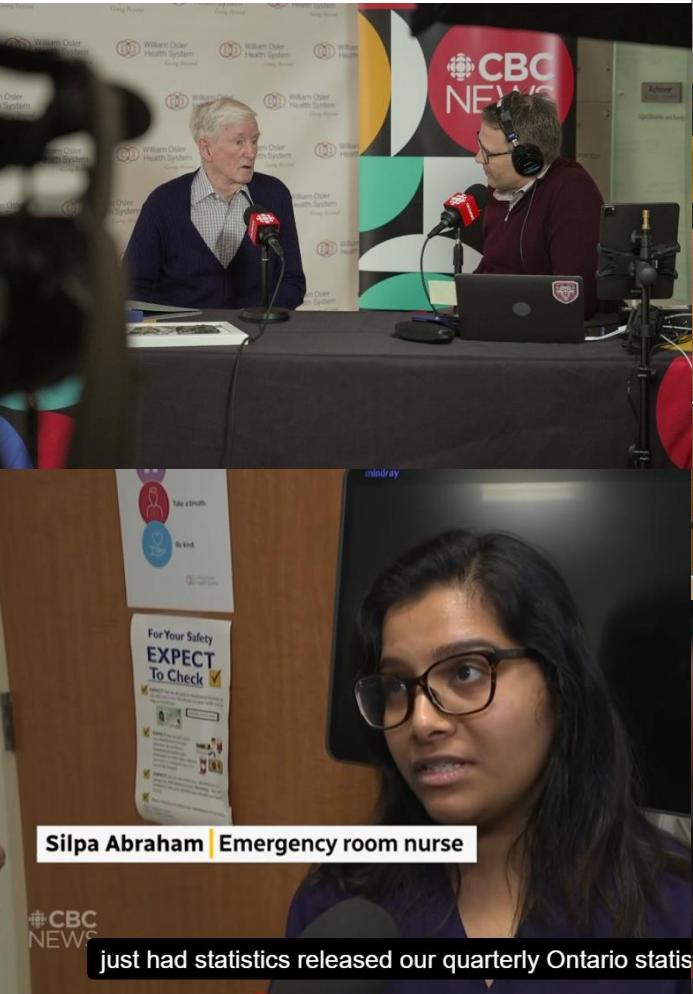


# Preparing people, not scripts

- Nurses
- Physicians
- Clinical leaders
- Executives

- We did not script answers
- **We prepared people** for difficult, human questions
- **Authenticity** was the strategy



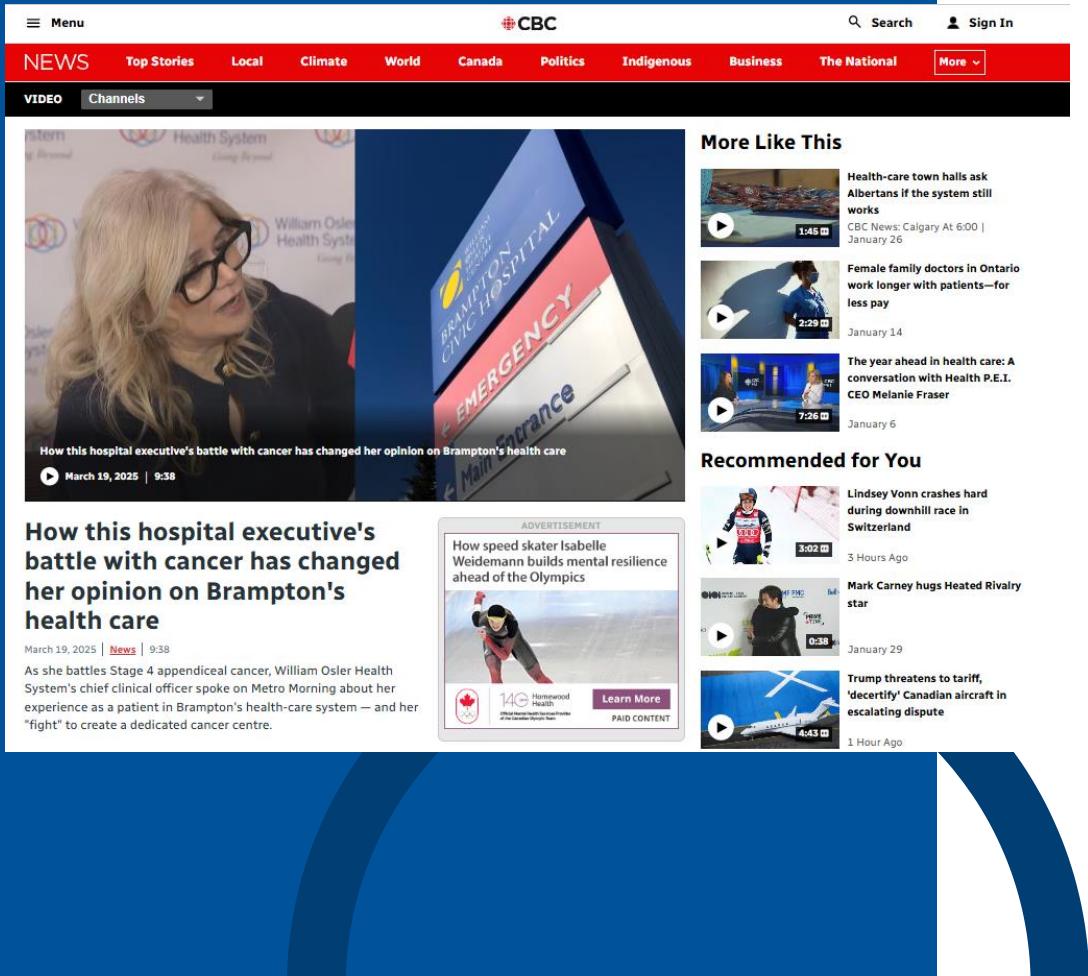
# March 19, 2025

## 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



**More Like This**

- Health-care town halls ask Albertans if the system still works
- Female family doctors in Ontario work longer with patients—for less pay
- The year ahead in health care: A conversation with Health P.E.I. CEO Melanie Fraser

**Recommended for You**

- Lindsey Vonn crashes hard during downhill race in Switzerland
- Mark Carney hugs Heated Rivalry star
- Trump threatens to tariff, 'decertify' Canadian aircraft in escalating dispute

**ADVERTISEMENT**

How speed skater isabelle Weidemann builds mental resilience ahead of the Olympics

March 19, 2025 | 9:38

As she battles Stage 4 appendiceal cancer, William Osler Health System's chief clinical officer spoke on Metro Morning about her experience as a patient in Brampton's health-care system — and her "fight" to create a dedicated cancer centre.

March 19, 2025 | News | 9:38

How this hospital executive's battle with cancer has changed her opinion on Brampton's health care

March 19, 2025 | 9:38

As she battles Stage 4 appendiceal cancer, William Osler Health System's chief clinical officer spoke on Metro Morning about her experience as a patient in Brampton's health-care system — and her "fight" to create a dedicated cancer centre.

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

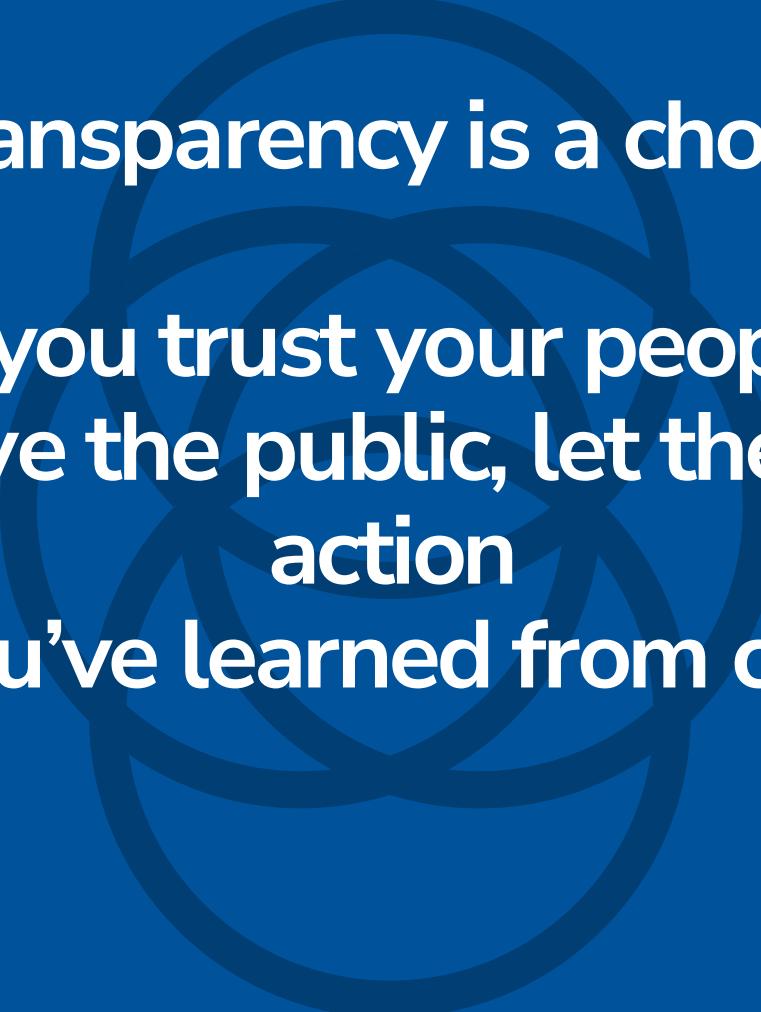


# Key take aways for crisis communicators



- 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**