



Northern Health keeping wage incentive for hospital pharmacists

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The Northern Health Authority has a prescription to cure potential labour unrest at University Hospital of Northern B.C.

The organization is refusing to accept a provincial push to reduce the wages of its hospital pharmacists.

The Health Employers Association of B.C. recently requested that health authorities send a temporary eight to 13 per cent increase in hospital pharmacist wages that was adopted in 2006 to bring private sector community pharmacist wages on par with hospital pharmacist wages, and help hospitals recruit much-needed pharmacists.

"In Northern Health, we are still experiencing vacancies in our pharmacist positions and there is still a differential between public sector and private sector wages, so we made the decision to continue the temporary wage adjustment," said Michael MacMillan, chief operating officer for Northern Health.

Recruitment has been challenging for the last 10 years, said MacMillan.

"As with most health professionals, we've gone through a period of short supply and making sure we have long-term stability in our system is important to Northern Health."

Hospital pharmacists earn from \$39 to \$50 an hour, while their private sector colleagues earn \$50 to \$65. Wages are higher for hospital pharmacists in smaller communities in Northern Health's jurisdiction, particularly in northern B.C.

UHNBC pharmacist Carol Gee was delighted by the news that Northern Health is backing its 19 hospital pharmacists.

She said as many as three hospital pharmacists were considering leaving UHNBC if the wage incentive was dropped.

"If a pharmacist quits or leaves it takes years to replace them because we can't attract them to the north," said Gee. "If all they are worried about is money, I don't think they realize the impact pharmacists have on budgets."

Having worked as a hospital pharmacist for 11 and a half years in Prince George, Gee said she routinely joins the rounds with doctors and nurses on the family practices ward and is in steady contact with patients to learn more about their conditions.

Watching patients during post-operative recovery gives hospital pharmacists insight into medications are needed, or not needed.

Forexample, she can recommend medication in pill form rather than the moreexpensive intravenous by observing the patient.

Upon discharge, she can provide advice to the patient to help prevent readmission to hospital. Close to one in four patients are in hospital to treat reactions to prescription drugs.

"Getting somebody home quicker saves thousands of dollars," said Gee, "and if I can help that, I feel I've earned my keep."

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