



VGH technician shortage threatens to derail urgent heart surgeries

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By Manori Ravindran, Vancouver Sun August 14, 2012

Since July 24, three non-elective heart surgeries at Vancouver General Hospital have had to be postponed due to a shortage of heart-lung machine technicians, or perfusionists. The in-patients, all with potentially life-threatening conditions, required urgent surgeries, but their operations had to be rescheduled because the only perfusionist available was called in for a double lung transplant that required 24-hour monitoring.

The operations, which were completed late last week, are the second group of surgeries postponed in the last month. Four operations were cancelled in late July after one of the specialized technicians was injured.

Rob Chalus, a perfusionist at VGH, said the hospital is so understaffed with technicians that his colleagues worry about the fate of their patients if more aren't hired.

"People around here are like, 'What's it going to take? People are going to die because there's no perfusionist, and because of delays,'" he said. "Right now, the weakest links in the chain are perfusionists."

The technicians are specialized health care professionals who use heart-lung machines to manage the physiological and metabolic needs of patients while surgeons operate on hearts that are not beating. Heart surgeries require the efforts of a perfusionist, an anesthetist and a cardiac surgeon; without all three, the operation can't be completed.

Chalus, 40, who has more than 11 years experience and has worked in Newfoundland, Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan said B.C. hospitals are the most understaffed.

"We're at a critical low," said Chalus, who has worked at VGH for two years. "[Last weekend] I had one colleague who worked 35 hours, and another who worked 37 hours ... We're working

away and it seems like there's no end in sight."

Miriam Sobrino, union spokeswoman for the Health Sciences Association of B.C., pointed out that at "optimal staffing levels" there would be 50 perfusionists across B.C. Only 39 are currently available.

Sobrino, whose union represents 16,000 health professionals across the province, said heart patients can expect more delays in surgeries unless the government actively recruits more of the specialized technicians.

VGH has eight full-time perfusionists on staff, in addition to one part-time, and another casual technician. Trudi Beutel, a spokeswoman for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, said the hospital has enough employees to regularly schedule a full slate of surgeries, but it recognizes more are needed.

"All I can say is that we'd like more, we don't have them, we're hoping to get more in the future," she said.

Beutel added that if an urgent operation is cancelled, VGH will go "on diversion," meaning it will send a patient to another hospital for surgery, a tactic that can have serious repercussions, said Chalus.

The VGH perfusionist said during the August long weekend, Lower Mainland hospitals were so understaffed that cardiac centres could not perform any emergency heart surgeries due to lack of heart-lung machine technicians.

"If you needed emergency heart surgery, you needed to go to Victoria," he said. Chalus added that the government needs to do more to recruit and retain specialized healthcare professionals.

Ryan Jobs, a spokesman for the Ministry of Health, said that in the mid- to late-2000s, the province identified perfusionists as an "area of need." In 2011, it opened a two-year perfusion training program at the B.C. Institute of Technology, but the program, which takes seven candidates at a time, will only contribute a fraction of the perfusionists needed.

The Health Sciences Association's Sobrino said two of the candidates set to graduate from the program this November are already interviewing for positions in Alberta.

-When they come out of training, they can potentially earn \$11 more per hour [in Alberta], and pay less for rent," said Sobrino. -They have a lot more options because they're younger and much more mobile."

For now, Chalusa said the status quo cannot continue at hospitals like VGH, for the sake of perfusionists and their patients.

-I'm not here to blame anyone," he said. -I'm just disappointed that sometimes things are made to look like they're not as bad. Because the problem is only getting worse by the week."

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