



Surgery, lab tests to be delayed by strike

December 5, 2012

[BC Local News](#)

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Published: December 05, 2012 3:00 PM

Updated: December 05, 2012 3:39 PM

Hospital pharmacists and medical imaging technicians plan to go ahead with brief strikes Thursday and Friday as a mediator attempts to reach a settlement with 16,000 health science employees at hospitals and clinics across B.C.

Mediator Vince Ready was brought in Tuesday after negotiations that started in February failed to produce an agreement. The Health Employers Association of B.C. issued a statement Wednesday warning that the unions intend to go ahead with its first rotating strikes despite the mediation effort.

Michael Marchbank, CEO of the employers' association, said hospitals have no choice but to begin postponing non-emergency procedures, including surgery and diagnostic tests.

"Employers are very concerned about the patient care impact that will result from this action," Marchbank said.

The first strike is expected to be by hospital pharmacists, performing essential services only from 9 a.m. to midnight Thursday. That would be followed by a 24-hour essential-service-only strike by medical imaging technologists, who perform x-rays, CT and MRI scans, nuclear medicine tests and other imaging procedures.

The Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association, representing a group of unions, says there will be no picket lines. Surrey Memorial Hospital, recovering from a broken water main that forced closure of the emergency ward and damaged scanning equipment, will be exempted from strike action.

Reid Johnson, president of the largest union, the Health Sciences Association, said the B.C. government's "co-operative gains" bargaining mandate has not produced an employer wage offer, and the presence of a mediator alone isn't enough to suspend strike action.

"We tabled a proposal for four per cent [wage increase] over two years, with no benefit concessions," Johnson said. "And that's in line with the other public sector agreements that have been reached over the last few months under the government's cooperative gains mandate."

He said nuclear medicine and other technical specialties are among the highest-skilled positions other than physicians, and there are chronic shortages of qualified staff.

B.C. needs to pay competitive wages and also train more technicians at home rather than recruiting from other countries, Johnson said.

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