

BULLETIN

More respiratory therapists needed at NRGH

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The Health Sciences Association of B.C. wants Vancouver Island Health Authority to hire more respiratory therapists for Nanaimo Regional General Hospital.

VIHA says it wants to raise staffing levels, but can't find people to fill the positions.

"There have been times at Nanaimo where one respiratory therapist has been on for a 24-hour period," said Reid Johnson, association president. "So the respiratory therapists at Nanaimo have filed several grievances about dangerous workloads and dangerous conditions."

Johnson said respiratory therapists - health-care professionals specially trained in setting up and operating oxygenation equipment, ventilators and other devices, plus specific medications used in respiratory therapies - are fatigued. Dangerous conditions for patients and staff are created, which could lead to a situation where a single therapist on a shift might have to choose between treating a heart-attack patient in the emergency ward and a patient in respiratory distress in another ward.

"Those are the kinds of things that are happening," Reid said. "They are hugely busy all the time because there's a critical shortage of respiratory therapists at Nanaimo and other places as well."

Regular staffing at NRGH sees two respiratory therapists on day shift, two therapists on night shift, plus one extra therapist for six hours Monday through Friday.

Colleen Butcher, director of medicine for VIHA, said all respiratory therapist positions are filled at NRGH, but two therapists have been off work unexpectedly for the last four to six weeks.

"If someone is off because of illness or injury then we need to shuffle people again to fill in the shift," Butcher said. "We have posted one regular position to help us recruit someone. As you can imagine, it's difficult to hire people for casual work because casual work isn't guaranteed work, so we have posted one full-time position." Because there are no casual respiratory therapists available on the Island to fill vacant shifts, regularly scheduled therapists are swapped in where possible.

"We have been made aware that there have been two or three occasions when an RT elected to stay for an additional shift, because they felt there was a need to do so," Butcher said.

WorkSafe B.C. investigated, ordering VIHA to have a plan for adequate staffing in place and a stated range of duties for the staff.

"We do take workplace safety very seriously and we work very closely with WorkSafe B.C. to provide a healthy workplace," Butcher said. "We don't require staff to work excessive hours or risk their safety due to fatigue and we certainly appreciate the patience and support of people who are impacted by this situation."

The association is citing the shortage of respiratory therapists at NRGH as a localized example of a provincewide issue. Johnson said B.C. is short 2,000 health science professionals provincewide, adding that not only can health-care professionals earn more money elsewhere, but also not enough new health-care professionals are being trained in B.C.

"For the last 10 years, this government has been committed to doubling the number of training spaces for doctors and nurses and also regionalized those training spaces around the province and they've been successful at that," Johnson said. "We haven't had the same political will to do the same for health science professions ... We do have a problem in that we're not training enough health science professionals and we're not paying them competitive wages. We're not able to retain them."

B.C.'s health science professionals have been without a contract since March. Contract bargaining broke off

Oct. 31.

The association issued 72-hours strike notice Friday after the Health Employers' Association of B.C. - the provincial government's bargaining agent - called the unions back to the table Thursday, but failed to appear itself. It could not guarantee it would appear until Friday (Nov. 30).

Johnson said strike notice does not mean British Columbians will find health- care facilities behind picket lines. Job action could range from limiting administrative duties, to a ban on overtime or study sessions, to a full withdrawal of service.

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