

BULLETIN

Health staff start job action

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Prince George Citizen

Some elective surgeries are expected to be postponed Friday as members of the Health Sciences Association of B.C. complete a two-day job action.

For 24 hours beginning at midnight Friday morning, staff who operate diagnostic imaging equipment such as MRIs will reduce their staffing levels to minimum essential levels across the province.

There will be enough staff on hand to cover emergency situations, but not handle a full patient load.

Northern Health spokeswoman Eryn Collins said that means tests and some non-emergency surgeries that require diagnostic tests performed immediately before the procedure will be postponed. Collins said Northern Health has been preparing for the possibility of job action and has contacted affected patients.

The strike doesn't effect all facilities, for instance it's expected to be business as usual at Phoenix Medical Imaging on Friday.

Any patients who haven't heard from their health professionals should still go to their appointments as scheduled.

The union, which represents about 17,000 workers in fields ranging from lab technologists to physiotherapists, is seeking wage increases of two per cent each year for two years. This week a mediator was brought in to help kick start the negotiations, which have been dragging on for nine months.

Health Sciences Association president Reid Johnson said lower wages in B.C. compared with other jurisdictions has led to staffing shortages across the province. The lack of qualified staff means patient care is being impacted all the time, not just due to the current job action.

"Every day there are procedures that are canceled or postponed due to shortages of health sciences professionals," Johnson said. "We're just trying to get the government's attention here that we need a reasonable collective agreement."

According to figures provided to the Northern Health board of directors on Monday, there are 36 vacancies for health sciences staff in the region, down from 41 vacancies during the previous reporting period. The northern interior section, including Prince George, currently has 14 vacancies.

If negotiations don't progress, Johnson said more job actions could be planned for the future.

"I wouldn't limit it to a one-time only," Johnson said. "Our hope is that the government comes back with a reasonable offer we can work with. Right now it's not there."

On Thursday, union members working at hospital pharmacies began the job action by going down to essential services levels, which had the potential to lead to delays in patients receiving medications.

As of midday Thursday, Collins said Northern Health had yet to notice any disruption caused by the staffing reduction.

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