

BULLETIN

## B.C.'s health science professionals call off job action

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### The Province

Byline: Derek Spalding

This week's anticipated cancellation of medical procedures throughout Vancouver Island hospitals was called off Sunday, but the dispute between health professionals and their employers continues.

After three days of talks overseen by veteran labour mediator Vince Ready, members of the Health Sciences Association of B.C. charged Sunday that they are being goaded into a strike by the government's bargaining group, the Health Employers Association of B.C.

The association issued a statement Sunday saying that the provincial government is offering a general wage increase of 1.4 per cent over two years, while some health-care workers could be facing wage rollbacks.

"There's no doubt in my mind they are trying to provoke our members into escalating job action ... giving the government an excuse to recall the legislature to impose a contract," said Reid Johnson, president of the health professionals' group.

The bargaining team is taking the offer back to its 14,500 members, who have not had a contract since 2009. In the meantime, the health professionals' association has called off rotating strikes that began Thursday.

The Health Employers Association of B.C. refused to comment Sunday on the allegation about provoking an escalation of the strike.

"We're pleased they called off the job action and we're anxious to get back to the table," said Michael Marchbank, president of the employers' association.

Johnson will ask his members what they want to do next.

"We now know exactly what government thinks of the value of health-science professionals in the public health care system, and we're going to share that with our members," he said.

Job action so far had only affected non-essential services, but it has made an impact. The retail pharmacy at Royal Jubilee Hospital was closed last week after about 60 per cent of pharmacy staff in hospitals booked off work.

Rotating strikes were expected to continue in the coming week, causing hundreds of cancellations, affecting laboratory, cardiology and electromyography services, according to the Vancouver Island Health Authority.

VIHA spokeswoman Suzanne Germain said Sunday that staff will not be able to restore full services on such short notice.

"It isn't like a light switch that you can just switch back on," she said. "We'll be ramping them back up as quickly as we can, but they won't be at 100 per cent [Monday]."

More than 500 lab services scheduled for Monday within the authority were postponed Friday.

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