

BULLETIN

Cancel Chilliwack rehab closure say residents at 'town hall' meeting

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Byline: Robert Freeman

Chilliwack was urged at a Tuesday night "town hall" meeting to push back against the pending closure of the rehab unit at Chilliwack General Hospital.

Chilliwack-Hope MLA Gwen O'Mahony, who organized the meeting, gamely vowed to carry a call to cancel the closure until all the community's concerns are addressed to Health Minister Mike de Jong.

But the end of in-hospital rehab services in Chilliwack - which was deemed important enough by the Fraser Health Authority to open the \$2.5-million unit six years ago - seems final.

Scott Brolin, the FHA's director of rehabilitation services, told the Tuesday audience of about 80 that it's expected no new patients will be admitted to the unit after the end of August.

He agreed the plan to replace the unit with out-patient services and to send patients needing in-hospital rehab to Abbotsford "did not roll out" as intended, but the FHA is committed to closing any service gaps for patients before the change is final, he said.

However, it seems questionable that home care support services in Chilliwack, one of the main concerns raised at the meeting, can be beefed up in that time.

O'Mahony, NDP skills training critic, moderated a panel at that meeting that included Bonnie Pearson, secretary/business manager at the Hospital Employees Union, Allan Hunt, president of the Chilliwack & District Seniors Resource Society, Reid Johnson, president of the Health Sciences Association, John Simpson, a volunteer with the Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association and Brolin.

Dr. Ralph Jones, lead physician of the Chilliwack Division of Family Practice, a non-profit society representing family physicians, also took part in the panel discussion.

He did not criticize the quality of home care support in Chilliwack, but did suggest the system needs a "redesign" to ensure all patient needs, including transportation and motivation, are looked after when patients return home from hospital.

The FHA insists that rehab patients will have better health outcomes by returning home, rather than staying in the hospital unit.

Pearson agreed, but only if there are home support services in place.

"Home is best when it makes sense and can be supported," she said, but it is a "hollow" program if the government does not provide the funding.

Johnson said home care and home support in Chilliwack "needs additional money."

The BC Liberal government earmarked \$135 million in its last budget as an "incentive for builders and developers," he said. "That money could have gone to home support."

He said the FHA is under pressure "imposed by the BC government" to cut costs, "but sometimes the best economic decision ... is not the best health decision for an individual or a community."

"Your community needs to decide if there's more you want to do about it," he said, adding that the community has a "right to consultation" just like union workers at the hospital.

"We were informed of this decision, (but) we had no opportunity to influence the decision," he said.

The opportunity to influence a decision is key to the definition of consultation, which the FHA did not do with

hospital doctors, municipal leaders, or the community at large.

Why that consultation never took place has never been clearly answered.

Brolin tried to assure the audience that the FHA executive has learned from this experience, and sees "the need to involve folks" the next time an initiative like this is introduced.

"Next time isn't good enough," a member of the audience shouted.

Dr. Jones, who told Brolin an apology the society received for the lack of consultation was "not accepted," suggested the reason was either "incompetence or Machiavellian tactics."

The Tuesday night meeting was the first public meeting since the closure was announced May 24.

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017