



New agreement aims to reduce nurses' workload

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Times Colonist (Victoria)

CORRECTION: (From Times Colonist, October 4, 2012) NURSES' WORK WEEK BOOSTED 90 MINUTES: A tentative agreement between B.C. nurses and the province would boost nurses' work week by 90 minutes beginning April 1, as well as provide the equivalent of 2,125 more nurses across the province by 2016 by increasing total straight-time nursing hours by more than 4.1 million. The members of the Nurses Bargaining Association, which includes the B.C. Nurses' Union, the Union of Psychiatric Nurses and the Health Sciences Association, have been without a contract since March 31. Incorrect information appeared on page A3 of Wednesday's Times Colonist.

More than 32,000 registered nurses and psychiatric nurses across B.C. will vote Oct. 18 on whether to ratify a contract that will boost their pay and replace nurses on sick or holiday leave.

And if there are exceptions on the replacements, nursing staff - not "bean counters" - will make the decision based on their knowledge of patient care and safety, said Debra McPherson, president of the B.C. Nurses' Union, on Tuesday as she released details of a tentative labour deal with the province.

Moreover, when patients are placed in hallways or other over-capacity problems occur, employers must call in more nurses to meet patient needs, as determined jointly by the manager and the charge nurse.

The agreement also boosts the nurses' work week by 90 minutes beginning April 1, 2013, which translates into the equivalent of 2,125 more nurses across the province by 2016, McPherson said.

McPherson and about 300 union leaders overwhelmingly endorsed the agreement after almost six hours of questions, answers and explanations on Tuesday.

"No agreement has everything we always wanted it to be. However, this agreement does contain clear, enforceable provisions to improve patient care by increasing staffing and reducing nurses' workloads," McPherson told the Times Colonist.

Currently, nurses who call in sick or are absent for other reasons are "quite frequently" not replaced, she said.

"I was told recently by [the Vancouver] Coastal Health Authority that 60 per cent of their sick leave calls go unreplaced. Our nurses find themselves working short a lot."

The agreement would require employers to backfill vacations and all types of leaves if the nurse in charge judged that patientcare conditions required it, she said.

"I think that's really important, that decisionmaking gets taken out of the hands of bean counters and put into the hands of people delivering the care, with the kind of clinical judgment to make that determination," she said.

The tentative contract falls into the category of what the provincial government calls "co-operative gains" - meaning any gains in salary and other benefits must be paid for through cost reduction and increased productivity.

The B.C. Nurses' Union, which includes the Union of Psychiatric Nurses and the Health Sciences Association, has been without a contract since March 31.

In the first year of the proposed contract, nurses would have no wage increase. A three per cent increase would kick in on April 1, 2013, the same time nurses would begin a 37.5-hour work week.

Under the expired contract, a first-year nurse in direct patient service starts at \$30.79 an hour, which rises to \$42 an hour after nine years. About half of the membership works full time, while the rest work a combination of part-time and replacement shifts.

Provisions of the tentative agreement, reached last week, include "clear, enforceable provisions to reduce nurses' workload problems and improve patient care and patient safety" with the deciding factor being "the needs of patients, not budget concerns," the union said.

The agreement includes a provision that the number of straight-time nursing hours worked by registered nurses and registered practical nurses "never" falls lower than the 4.1 million hours worked as of Dec. 31, 2012. In addition, casual and part-time nursing work will be converted into regular full-time and part-time nursing positions.

The union didn't get everything it wanted.

"We were looking to get nurse-patient ratios, but with the guaranteed replacements, the review of baseline staffing and the addition of the new nurses, I believe we've done a good job in coming close to it," McPherson said.

"We certainly believe it's a big step forward, and I'm really glad we're able to finally and at last recognize the clinical judgment of nurses in staffing decisions."

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