

BULLETIN

B.C. healthcare professionals' job action disrupts medical services (version 3)

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The NHL wasn't the only industry to feel the pangs of labour setbacks near the end of this week. B.C. health science professionals are cutting back to essential services Thursday and Friday in a job action that disrupts healthcare for patients across the province.

While talks between hockey players and owners broke off dramatically Thursday night, thousands of hospital pharmacists, public health inspectors, dietitians, physiotherapists and lab and medical imaging technologists were reducing to barebones service in all six of the province's health jurisdictions.

"Tomorrow's job action will have significant impact for our patients, as many non-urgent medical imaging procedures will have to be rescheduled," said Vancouver Coastal Health spokesman Gavin Wilson on Thursday.

These procedures include non-emergency X-rays, mammograms, sonograms, MRIs, CT scans and other diagnostic imaging procedures that will need rescheduling.

"Essentially, we're looking for the same deal that everybody else in the public sector has been getting, like the provincial government employees," said Justin Schmid, a national representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents about 500 B.C. health professionals.

CUPE is one of five unions comprising the 16,000-member Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association (HSPBA), currently undergoing the job action.

Schmid said health professionals are seeking a 4-per cent wage increase over two years with no concessions.

"There's a huge wage disparity between public health inspectors in B.C. versus Alberta and other parts of the country. It poses a big problem for keeping them here. A lot of them look at those higher wages and want to move away to those higher paying jobs elsewhere, where the job is more properly recognized," Schmid said.

The HSPBA has been in mediated negotiations with the Health Employers Association of B.C. (HEABC) since Tuesday to hammer out a new collective bargaining agreement.

Michael Marchbank, President and CEO of the HEABC -- which represents more than 260 publicly funded health care employers in the province -- said the job action went against negotiating conventions.

"The established practice in labour relations is for bargaining associations to hold off on job action during mediation," Marchbank said in a statement. "Employers do not understand why the (HSPBA) would be proceeding with job action when there is an opportunity for dialogue with a recognized and respected mediator.

"We're disappointed that the HSPDA went ahead with job action," he said later in an interview. "Obviously patients will be inconvenienced."

Essential services like emergency care continue to run during job actions.

The HEABC has already reached three of five collective agreements in the health sector with bargaining associations representing nurses, resident physicians and other health services employees.

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