

BULLETIN

VIHA fails to protect health care staff; WorkSafeBC to issue fines

February 3, 2011

WorkSafeBC has issued nine separate orders at two Victoria-area mental health facilities criticizing the failure of Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) to protect the safety of staff.

-This is a staggering number of WorkSafeBC orders issued against one employer," said HSA President Reid Johnson.

Johnson, who has worked on psychiatric wards as a social worker, said unstable psychiatric patients are often unable to restrain their violent behavior. Hospital management, he said, has to take responsibility for patient as well as staff safety.

The incidents leading up to the orders issued recently are disturbing. In August 2009, a violent patient at Eric Martin Pavilion beat a psychiatric nurse so severely that she may never work again. He punched her. He kicked her to the ground. Then he beat her head repeatedly against the hard floor. The same patient assaulted other nurses after that incident. After another violent incident in March 2010, the patient was removed from the Eric Martin Pavilion and transferred to a corrections facility ... where he then assaulted a corrections officer.

In April 2010, the Health Sciences Association called on WorkSafeBC to take action.

After a thorough inspection, WorkSafeBC issued orders compelling VIHA to protect workers from violence in the workplace. HSA is demanding that VIHA immediately comply with all legal requirements of WorkSafeBC.

-That includes regular risk assessments," Johnson said. -It also means improving hospital intake protocols to ensure that care can be provided safely. We have also been calling on VIHA to increase security support.

-With proper safety precautions and systems in place, incidents like these are preventable. When patients are known to be violent and unstable, VIHA must make sure health workers are informed of past violent behavior, and the potential for more. Hospital security and safety is a serious issue. I hope no one dies before VIHA acts on their responsibility," Johnson said.

In recent years, WorkSafeBC has fined VIHA a total of \$225,000 for failure to take measures to prevent violence at Nanaimo Regional, West Coast General, and Campbell River Hospitals.

-For the first set of violations at Nanaimo General and West Coast General, VIHA was fined \$75,000," Johnson said. -For the second set ... at Campbell River ... the fine doubled because the violations were so similar."

WorkSafeBC has said the fines related to the violations at Eric Martin Pavilion and Adanac will be even more severe.

-Is this where our precious health care dollars should be going? Fines because of safety violations?" Johnson said.

HSA represents registered psychiatric nurses who work in acute care, long term care, mental health, and home support. With 900 hours of training in psychiatry and mental health, RPNs are the caregiver of choice in mental health. RPNs are a founding profession of the Health Sciences Association, the union representing more than 16,000 health care and social service professionals in hospitals, child development centres, transition houses and other community agencies across BC.

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