



Nurses start bargaining: Protecting patient safety is top priority

January 26, 2012

Ensuring the safety of patients in BC's health care facilities is the priority for nurses, as they began bargaining this week for a new contract with the province's health authorities.

HSA's Registered Psychiatric Nurses are represented by Lions Gate RPN Val Barker and Senior Labour Relations Officer Pat Blomme.

HSA President Reid Johnson said psychiatric nurses want to ensure they can continue to deliver safe and high quality care. "With hundreds of hours of specialized training, Registered Psychiatric Nurses are the caregivers of choice in mental health," he said. "We'll be at the table advocating on their behalf."

The nurses wrapped up the first two days of preliminary bargaining discussions with health employers yesterday (January 25). Bargaining will continue for two weeks beginning February 20.

Problems with patient safety and understaffing have been in the spotlight recently, as nurses have been forced to care for patients in hospital hallways, lounges and other areas not appropriate for patient care, including a hospital coffee shop. Health employers rarely provide more nurses to handle these increasingly difficult caring conditions.

"As highlighted with critical safety concerns at Victoria's Eric Martin Pavilion and at Abbotsford Regional Hospital, RPNs need adequate staffing, logical communication about patient files, and thorough risk assessments and safety procedures," Johnson said. "Safe, quality patient care starts with adequate staffing on the wards."

In a province wide survey last spring, a majority of BC Nurses Union members reported that normal nurse staffing levels are not adequate for the number of patients for whom they are required to provide care in hospitals, in community services and in long term care nursing homes. The concern is particularly overwhelming in hospital emergency wards, on medical units, in long term care and for case managers trying to find appropriate services for clients in the community. Members say that for much of the time, managers aren't even meeting their inadequate normal staffing levels.

In the survey, members put patient safety and safe staffing at the top of their priority list for bargaining. They also want job security for nurses, at a time when health authorities have been cutting back nursing staff to save money, failing to hire new nursing graduates into full-time positions, and refusing to backfill nurses who are off sick or on vacation.

BCNU is the largest union in the Nurses Bargaining Association, which also includes the Health Sciences Association, the BCGEU, and the Union of Psychiatric Nurses.

The provincial contract covering more than 30,000 nurses expires March 31, 2012.
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