

BULLETIN

## Skilled health professionals in demand

October 1, 2003

### The Report: October 2003 vol.24 num.5

by RON OHMART



**y now, most members** have seen the newspaper ads the provincial government is running about the cost of health care. The clear message in the ads is: "if only health care professionals would just stop getting so much money, our public health care system would be better off."

That's the tune the Liberal government has been playing since before the last election. If any of us had time to look for the "stop repeat" button on the CD player, we'd have long ago shut it off. And we aren't the only ones.

Employers throughout the province have been hamstrung into doing the government's dirty work cutting and eliminating health care services throughout the province. Elimination of long-term care beds, closure of emergency rooms, loss of outpatient services – they're all cuts that in the short- and long-term will affect the health of British Columbians. The cuts and loss in service are all in response to severe budget restrictions the Ministry of Health has put on health authorities.

But employers know just as well as the health care professionals delivering the patient care services that without competitive pay, the health care system cannot keep the workers who are the health care system.

The northern part of our province is particularly vulnerable to the worldwide shortage of pharmacists, and the private sector's ability to manipulate the market to attract these health care professionals.

For example, the *Edmonton Journal* reported early in September that the biggest hospital in the Northwest Territories has run out of pharmacists. Stanton Territorial Hospital does not have a staff pharmacist. The department is now dependent on pharmacy technicians and long distance consultation to meet patients' needs.

It's unacceptable. And it's a situation that was threatening to spread into Northern BC.

HSA members are dedicated to providing health care services on a fair and equitable basis to the patients who need it – but in a climate where the market is so starved for their expertise, the offers have become too good to refuse.

Over the summer, HSA and the Northern Health Authority negotiated terms necessary to keep the HSA pharmacists in the hospital, despite the lure of the private sector – which sometimes offer substantially higher hourly rates and lucrative signing bonuses. This agreement helps bridge the divide between the public health care system and private sector pharmacists in the northern region of the province and will alleviate a severe recruitment and retention crisis in the region.

Pharmacy is not the only area that faces severe problems of shortages. Other professions are experiencing the same issues as there are fewer professionals to meet growing demand.

The government's strategy of putting its head in the sand and pretending that the problem can go away simply by cutting services and reducing the number of health care professionals in the system will not work. While "seamless and integrated" delivery of health services is often quoted in government releases, the loss of critical health professionals that provide the full range of needed services contradicts their own statements. (And refusing to acknowledge that a disjointed system cannot be sustained will not address the problems in our health care system.)

Health care is about the patients, and the people who deliver the care. You deserve to be supported for the contributions you make — not maligned in government advertising. 

*Ron Ohmart is HSA's Executive Director of Labour Relations.*

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

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