

Recreation therapist helps invigorate

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by PAUL DAYSON



Adrea Rusnak is a "people person." Her job as a recreational therapist is about people. Her role as HSA chief steward at Surrey Memorial Hospital is about people. The focus of her concerns about the future of health care in British Columbia is also about people.

Adrea Rusnak Chief steward & recreation therapist Surrey Memorial Hospital
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Rusnak is one of three recreational therapists working with seniors at Surrey Memorial Hospital's extended care facility. In addition to her role as chief steward at the hospital, she is the union's delegate to the New Westminster and District Labour Council.

As a recreation therapist, Rusnak works in an interdisciplinary environment with occupational and music therapists, as well as physiotherapists, to serve 70 to 100 residents and patients. She organizes events and activities, whether it's a cooking group, trips to the flower gardens, bingo, or bus trips to the seniors' centre or the mall.

"Of all the jobs in the hospital, this one is one of the most fun," Rusnak said. "It's about getting people active and moving, reintegrating people into their leisure pursuits." According to Rusnak, this gives elderly residents more independence and a higher quality of life.

When a patient is admitted, Rusnak does a survey of their leisure activities and hobbies in order to find a way to help them continue to enjoy or be re-introduced to their interests.

"If they have acquired a disability, they think they can't do anything. Or maybe their lives have revolved around work and leisure is something they have to learn. My job is about adapting their activities so that patients and residents can continue enjoying a full and active life."

In her work, Rusnak sees a range of clients. Some prefer large group activities, while others enjoy solitary hobbies - and patients' conditions can range from Parkinson's disease to Alzheimer's. And while there are often physical barriers to overcome, such as mobility issues, in such a large group, there are also differences in preferences and physical and mental ability. Rusnak is also sensitive to the wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds her patients and residents come from.

Her ability to be flexible and work with so many different variables in a social profession made her a natural choice as an HSA steward. Rusnak jokes about how she became a union activist and chief steward. "It was a mistake," she said with a grin.

When Rusnak was approached about becoming a department steward, she was told it wouldn't be much work. However, on her first visit to the on-site HSA stewards' office, she found herself attending a labour-management meeting, as the chief steward was leaving for another hospital.

Since her first days as a steward, Rusnak has racked up an impressive list of accomplishments as a union representative.

Her activity as chief steward has involved representing members in conflict with management, labour-management meetings, grievance filing, negotiating and dealing with cutbacks.

"I really enjoy the chief steward position. You end up meeting a lot of people around the hospital. I learn lots about the things other people are doing around the hospital," she said.

Members at Surrey Memorial have seen some intense activity. In 2001, to protest the provincial government's unfair legislation imposing a wage split between groups of health science professionals, HSA members at Surrey Memorial joined their colleagues across the province in job action. Rusnak organized a letters-to-the-editor campaign, petitions, sectoral withdrawal of services and, eventually, a full-scale withdrawal of services.

Members taking part in job action were encouraged to use their time to make a difference in their communities, so Rusnak organized Surrey members to take part in a blood drive to get members involved. "It just fit with our membership as health care workers," she said. "We chose our professions because we care, and this was another way for us to show the public how dedicated we are to their well-being."

When regionalization hit Surrey Memorial last year, what Rusnak saw made no sense to her. Some positions and services were cut back, among them recreational and music therapy.

She sees the effects on her clients. "I don't see the government looking at quality of life issues," she said.

"The provincial government is looking at the bottom line, not looking at people," Rusnak said.

"They claim that a home-like environment is being provided, but the hospital has eliminated providing coffee, milk, and juice around the clock," she said. "Now patients can only get them on their breakfast, lunch, dinner trays. People are right to be upset," she said.

Hospital management's scheduling changes don't make any sense to Rusnak either.

In previous bargaining the HSA had negotiated an eight-hour work day, with nine work days over two weeks. Management reduced days to 7.2 hours and brought back a regular five-day week. Rusnak said this amounts to a reduction in service because it necessarily includes more breaks. It also means increased costs, such as to pay premium rates for various staff who must now work overtime to meet patients' and doctors' needs. She sees the scheduling issue as a bottom line solution that doesn't work for the people who count on the health care system to be there for them when they need it.

As part of her commitment to the broader labour movement, Rusnak also sits on the New Westminster District Labour Council, representing HSA members all the way from New Westminster to Hope, liaising with activists from other unions. In addition, she was recently elected as a HSA member-at-large in her region for 2003.

Through the labour council, Rusnak is working to forge coalitions with members of other unions who are active on health care issues. "I'm encouraging other people to get involved in health-related community issues," she said. "As health care workers, we have to work to create a strong sense of community. Healthy communities and healthy people - I'm willing to work hard towards those goals, together with my colleagues, every day."



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