

Acute respiratory therapy shortages require immediate attention

April 1, 2004

The Report: April / May 2004 vol.25 num.2

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hat happens when you train only 135 people to fill 298 positions? You get one big shortage and one big headache.

What is respiratory therapy?

For most people, breathing is as easy and natural as blinking. But for thousands of Canadians, breathing is a struggle.

They might be accident victims, premature babies with immature lungs, heart attack and stroke patients, or people who live with asthma and emphysema. When it comes to their care, a respiratory therapist will likely play a vital role on the healthcare team. Respiratory therapists are healthcare professionals who assist physicians with the diagnosis and treatment of lung disorders.

Their duties include:

- Maintaining an open airway for trauma, intensive care, and surgery patients
- Assisting in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and support
- Providing life support for patients who can't breathe on their own
- Assisting in high risk births
- Stabilizing high risk patients being moved by air or ground ambulance
- Assisting anaesthesiologists in the operating room
- Administering inhaled drugs and medical gases such as asthma medication and oxygen
- Conducting tests to measure lung function
- Teaching people to manage their asthma or to quit smoking
- Providing in-home respiratory care to adults and children with chronic lung disease.

Most respiratory therapists work in hospitals. You'll find them in neonatal nurseries, operating rooms, intensive care units, general wards, and emergency departments.

Source: Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists

And it gets worse when 39 of the people you have trained move out of province to start their careers in greener pastures.

This is what has happened in BC over the last four years in the education and recruitment of respiratory therapists.

In 2001 the BC Society of Respiratory Therapists (BCSRT) surveyed the needs of RTs in BC. In February 2004 they conducted a second survey to confirm their data to 2003 and to update their projections for 2004.

Here are some of their findings:

- Since 2001 BC has faced constant shortages of RTs.
- BC has only one accredited RT program at the University College of the Cariboo (UCC) in Kamloops.
- UCC does not have the capacity to train and graduate the new RTs in the numbers BC needs.
- BC's shortage of RTs is made even worse by the continuing flow of UCC graduates out of province, particularly to Alberta.

The statistics are stark. The problem is laid out for all to see. The solution is not.

In the last four years BC required 298 RTs, but graduated only 135 at the Kamloops campus. 39 of these graduates moved out of province, most to Alberta.

As a result, in the last four years only 96 RT graduates from BC have been available to fill 298 RT positions in BC, leaving a province-wide shortage of 202 RTs.

The BCSRT notes that BC has traditionally recruited outside of BC ... particularly in Alberta and Ontario ... to meet these shortages.

But these sources are drying up.

The arbitrated RT wage rates in both Alberta and Ontario have now moved ahead of the government imposed RT wage rates in BC.

BC has become uncompetitive in the market place for health professional wage rates.

Until BC's traditionally competitive health professional wage rates are restored through collective bargaining, and until Victoria increases the number of training positions for BC health professionals, the quality of health care in this province will continue to slip in the face of continuing staffing shortages. 

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