

Reckless cuts to health care take human toll

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t seemed like the realization of a dream when physiotherapist Deanna Riedstra moved to the Okanagan with her husband and two young children less than a year ago. But, thanks to Gordon Campbells government, that dream has started to look more like a nightmare.

Deanna Riedstra Physiotherapist

Riedstra left a position shed held for almost 10 years at Prince George Regional Hospital, while her teacher husband gave up 12 years of seniority and benefits to take a teaching position in Vernon. They sold their home on six acres and began building a house in Vernon, confident of a secure future since health care professionals and teachers were in great demand.

She began work at Enderby and District Memorial Hospital in January. -From the first day I started work, I began to hear rumours about the hospital closing down," she said. The rumours turned out to be true, and she was on the unemployment rolls on June 21.

Her employer, the Interior Health Authority, decided to deal with Victorias severe cutbacks by cancelling almost all outpatient physiotherapy. It was left to the employees, already reeling from losing their jobs, to give the bad news to their patients.

Riedstra had to explain the situation to a man in his 90s with arthritis, who had just driven 15 kilometres for treatment at the Pleasant Valley Health Centre in Armstrong, where she worked two days of her work week.

-I had to tell him that I couldnt see him. It broke my heart," she said.

-I handed him a pamphlet on osteoarthritis and scrounged around in the closet until I found a pair of old crutches to give him. I told him to write his MLA, and to try Salmon Arm or Vernon. Then I went into my office and cried.

-I know lots about arthritis, so to be able only to do those few things was very frustrating."

Riedstra recalled that when the local health authorities announced the cutbacks in April, they sounded so - emotionless. They dont see the patients as I do."

Cancellation of the outpatient services means patients who need physiotherapy services have only one option: to see a private physiotherapist at a charge of \$30-\$40 a visit. -Who can afford that?" asked Riedstra, who notes some 40 per cent of the local residents are seniors on fixed incomes.

Riedstra points out that physiotherapy is crucial for chronic pain sufferers and post-surgery patients. Immediate treatment can make the difference between being active in a few weeks, or being sidelined for months.

After the cutbacks at Enderby Hospital, restricted services such as post-knee-replacement therapy and complex fracture management for the elderly continue, but at greatly reduced hours. And there is no relief at nearby Vernon Jubilee Hospital, which plans to reduce its full-time equivalent physiotherapy positions from four to one.

With the closure of Enderby Hospital, employees with up to 30 years seniority lost their jobs. Added to the pain was the passage of Bill 29, the so-called Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act, which ripped up health care collective agreements, abolishing job security and the right to priority placement. Riedstra has been working as a casual at Vernon hospital, but the future there is far from certain.

Riedstra is thankful for the support the union has given her, and values her decision a few years ago to become a general steward. -Its been a real eye-opener, making me aware of the value of the union. Before, it always seemed to be something you paid your dues to, and that was it.

-Steward training helped me deal with the frustration of issues Ive faced. It taught me to be more effective, and about what is in our collective agreement and how it can help us."

When she arrived at Enderby and District Memorial Hospital, she found that the chief stewards position was vacant. Taking on the position -has been a challenge, with all the layoffs," Riedstra said, but she felt it was important to continue to advocate for members particularly in such uncertain times.

It is in the nature of physiotherapists to change things Reidstra said, and she is actively advocating for patients and the health care system in her new community, speaking to the media and participating in demonstrations. In May, Reidstra was front and centre when health care workers and other residents, including the Shuswap First Nations band, whose tradition forbids sending ill members away from their community, blocked part of the highway and demonstrated outside the local chamber of commerce.

-We wanted to let them know how we felt," she said.

-The next day we were demonstrating at Silverstar [a local ski resort] where Gordon Campbell was speaking," she said.

She has also participated in a survey and agreed to be a witness in the legal action challenging Bill 29.

Riedstra regrets that many in the community are not yet aware of the impact of the health care cuts. She says one solution is to -discuss it in small places: talk to your neighbours and friends. Try to keep involved. Silence is our greatest enemy." 

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