



BULLETIN

## **HSA continues fight for better wages, working conditions**

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The health care system in the Central Vancouver Island Region continues to struggle. We can only hope that the next round of bargaining will bring substantial improvements, for the sake of the public, as well as for health care workers who have been fighting a losing battle to provide quality services under deteriorating work conditions.

Restructure, amalgamate, consolidate, regionalize ... these terms have become commonplace and interchangeable in our vocabulary, and are generally used to indicate a change in service delivery. While serving as a member of the HSA Paramedical Professional bargaining team during the last round of contract talks in 1998, I became concerned because the employer seemed more interested in abstract ideas like "seamless delivery," rather than the specifics of the collective agreement.

"Seamless delivery" ... a term we heard often ... was supposed to be an enhanced delivery model that benefited the patient. However, during bargaining, we did not see any concrete recommendations to reach this goal. And since the implementation of the current collective agreement, several restructuring concepts presented under the guise of "seamless delivery" have resulted in negative results for patients.

With restructuring, many of our members are forced to deliver services using a regional model, which may be more manageable in large urban centres, but is untenable in a geographically diverse region such as Central Vancouver Island.

When this government went down the road of regionalizing health care services, it was faced with the choice of focusing on governance or delivery of service. The choice seems to have been to focus on governance, which means that no matter how we amalgamate, consolidate or restructure, the bureaucracy tends to focus on governance issues before issues concerning delivery of services.

This understandably increases dissatisfaction and frustration among all health care workers, including physicians, nurses, and health science professionals. This can only add to the acute retention and recruitment problems, as well as further deterioration of public health services, as some health workers begin looking for alternative employment.

As we are all aware, the shortage of health professionals has become a dire problem that needs rapid resolution. Improvements to wages and working conditions ... including adequate staffing levels ... will be a

key part of the next round of bargaining. This will go a long way to alleviate problems that are typical of many workplaces.

For example, in my workplace, there is a constant accrual of overtime in the ultrasound department as the sonographers struggle on a daily basis to reduce the extraordinary waiting lists that the public is currently forced to accept. Some of us may think chronic overtime is great, but in reality, when I look at the haggard faces of my co-workers struggling to keep up, I somehow cant agree.

On-call pay is another issue I expect HSA members will want to tackle in the next round of bargaining. In 1989, our on-call rate of pay was \$1 per hour. In the last round of bargaining, we won a substantial increase, to \$2 per hour. When we ask for an increase in pay at the bargaining table, we are sometimes characterized as greedy, self-serving public employees. But when physicians ask for \$40 an hour to be on call, were told they deserve better pay for living in remote areas and for being on call. I know an ultrasound technologist who recently logged 128 hours of on call in a two-week period. I wonder how many physicians would deliver that service for \$2 per hour?

Clearly, we have many issues to address in the next round of bargaining. I look forward to hearing from HSA members at the upcoming Paramedical Professional Bargaining Proposal Conference in November about what our negotiating priorities should be. As a health professional frustrated with our current system, I join other HSA members every day in the fight for better health care for our patients. I am eager to see what strength HSA members can bring to bear on necessary changes to our current system. Bring on the next round!

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