

BULLETIN

## HSA calls for improved recruitment and retention strategies

October 1, 2000

### The Report: October 2000 vol.21 num.5

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If you need a cardiac ultrasound in Prince George, you can expect to wait three months. If you need one in Comox, you'll be waiting four months. If you need one in Campbell River or Powell River, you're out of luck - unless you're able to travel to Comox, and join the four-month waiting list. It's hard to imagine waiting that long for a procedure to help diagnose what may be a serious illness.

These are examples of how levels of health services are being eroded as a result of an unprecedented shortage of paramedical professionals at all levels - all across the province.

"The shortages of health professionals in BC is acute. It's not just doctors and nurses," says Cindy Stewart, HSA President. "Numerous factors are contributing to the current shortage, including an ageing work force, cuts to post-secondary training, and declining working conditions."

To call attention to this problem, HSA is kicking off a campaign calling on health care administrators and government policy makers to act quickly.

"In order to ensure this problem doesn't grow worse, and to encourage the eventual recovery of staffing levels, the provincial government needs to develop effective recruitment and retention strategies for paramedical professionals," Stewart says.

"For this to be successful, the government must work with post-secondary institutions, regional health authorities, professional associations, and unions to address various facets of this problem."

HSA Vice-President Kelly Finlayson agrees. "There's a real recruitment and retention problem," she says. "In Region I, for example - at St. Joseph's Hospital in Comox, the Chief Paramedical for the lab has been trying to recruit staff for six months. Two of the vacancies are for section head supervisors. Finally, he had to split up the jobs and create positions that lab technologists currently on staff would be qualified for," she says.

"And he has not been able to find any casual relief staff," she adds. "He has advertised, and even called 13 hospitals throughout BC with the job postings. He's attempted to recruit people from Alberta to Nova Scotia, and throughout the US.

"Everyone told him there's such a shortage that there are no lab techs out there for him to hire."

Finlayson reports that as a result, the Lab Chief has had to work almost 40 double shifts in order to try to fill the gaps himself.

"But no matter how hard the staff work, the impact this has had in our area are a decrease in services, an

increase in wait time to get the tests, and an increase in wait time to get the results. This has resulted in severe burnout and demoralization on the part of the staff left behind trying to maintain quality services for our patients."

In medical imaging, where Finlayson works herself, she has seen a similar situation develop. "Because Powell River Hospital has two sonographers off on WCB, and they have no relief staff, all Powell River patients requiring sonography are now being sent here to St. Josephs. Most of these patients are ambulatory and have been able to get here by themselves taking the ferry, but some of them have had to be transported by ambulance," Finlayson says.

Add to this a problem with the cardiac sonography machine in Campbell River, and the result is a lengthy waiting list at St. Josephs. "The waiting list for abdominal, and almost all non-urgent diagnostic testing is about two months," Finlayson adds.

"Whats really frustrating here is that although we have five machines, at this time were not able to use them to their full capacity, because of staff shortages."

Finlayson is enthusiastic about addressing these issues in the next round of bargaining. "I see the next round as a real opportunity to make improvements to our collective agreement," she says. "I am determined to see real gains for our members."

Fred McLeod, who represents Region 10 on HSAs Board of Directors, reports similar problems in his area. "At Prince George Regional Hospital, our physio department has been short one person for a while, and the lab is short two section heads. Both departments have been able to carry on, but Im told theres no casual relief," he says.

There is concern in several departments about the lack of relief. "The lab is covering the work by doing lots of overtime, and people having to work extra shifts," McLeod says. "And theres such an acute shortage in medical imaging that when an x-ray technologist was sick, they had to compensate in the department by working double shifts," he says.

McLeod says the shortage of pharmacists is another story. "The hospital in Smithers has been unable to find a pharmacist for so long that their pharmacy work is being done by a private pharmacy in town. This means increased costs for the hospital, since the drugs cant be bought in bulk, and theyre paying for the private pharmacys profit margin on top of that.

"The competition for pharmacists in northern communities is extremely high," he adds. "The pharmacy department at Prince George Regional Hospital was asked to provide coverage for the hospital in Kitimat, and had to decline - the department here is just barely getting by covering our hospital, without any real casual support."

McLeod says he is seeing HSA members burn out because of workload and stress. "We have to make sure that people are compensated in a way that attracts them to these jobs, especially in northern and rural areas," he says. "Recruiting more health care professionals is the only way to address the incredible stress and unmanageable workload

"Im really excited by this round of bargaining this spring," he says. "Im looking forward to this opportunity to improve the paramedical contract. Thats one of the pieces thats needed to solve this problem.

Cindy Stewart agrees that there are many sides to the problem. "We need to ensure that the compensation reflects the expertise and years of training," she says. "HSA members need better access to education and training dollars; they need to know that their classifications system is protected and enhanced to ensure career laddering; and they can be assured that these goals will be pursued in the next round of bargaining.

*The campaign highlighting the shortage of paramedical professionals will feature several elements, including print ads in community papers, and media kits including background information about the shortages, and what effects these have had. Chief Stewards will be provided with a series of four posters, postcards, and information to use in drafting letters to MLAs, letters to editors, or other opinion pieces. Watch for more*

*details this fall on your union notice board. Tell us about paramedical professional shortages in your area!*  
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