

BULLETIN

## Airing concerns

December 1, 2011

### The Report: December 2011 vol.32 num.4

BY LAURA BUSHEKIN

**THAT BIG SIGH OF RELIEF?** HSA member Simone Gruenig just might have something to do with it.

As a physiotherapist specializing in cardiorespiratory care, Gruenig says that one of the best parts of her job is the immediate relief she can bring to someone who is having trouble breathing.

-You can get very quick results, allowing someone to finally take a nice breath or breathe on their own again. It is very rewarding," says Gruenig, who works in the palliative care unit at Vancouver General Hospital.

As an HSA steward, Gruenig also has successfully improved working conditions at her site. Thanks to Gruenig, her colleagues can breathe easier, knowing their rights are safeguarded.

And when health care professionals rights are upheld, patients benefit, says Gruenig. -People fought for the things in the collective agreement not just to have a better working environment for themselves but also for better patient care. Because ultimately we are all here for the patient," says Gruenig.

Three victories at her current workplace stand out for Gruenig. The first paved the road for easier access for Gruenig and her colleagues for the right to education leave ... a very important issue for her profession.

-We like to do our best for our patients, so we need to stay abreast of evidence and new techniques. This takes money and courses," explains Gruenig. -In our collective agreement, it says that we are allowed \$600 per calendar year for education, but it stipulates that this is within budgetary restraints. When we go to managers to ask for courses, which are quite expensive, they typically say no, we dont have anything in our budget.

-In my first year here, I had quite a bit of back and forth with my manager because I wanted to take a course, but spending \$1000 cuts deeply into my monthly budget. I knew [this right] was in the collective agreement, so I started a grievance process. My understanding was that if the books were opened management couldnt justify not paying for the course."

The grievance was successful. -I was able to take the course, and apply what I learned to my patients. This allowed other physiotherapists to ask for education funding and education leave, knowing that someone had successfully gone through that process"

Since then, Gruenig has received the go-ahead every year to take a course. -Its nice to know the manager will work with me on the issues," she says.

Another significant success involved the issue of remuneration for being on call during lunch breaks. Gruenig was in a Practice Support Position at the time, and was expected to be on call during lunch, with no pay. She didnt question this practice until she went to steward training and read the collective agreement, which states that staff have the right to a flat rate if they keep their pager on during lunch break.

Gruenig felt encouraged by her recent success advocating for education leave. She approached her manager who agreed to pay the flat rate. But the issue wasn't resolved yet. The situation got complicated when another staff member stepped up and said he'd keep his pager on without getting paid.

"I thought, oh no, we are in the same union and you are saying you will do the same thing for free," recounts Gruenig. She says that strong communication skills were essential for solving this issue.

"There were some good conversations about the fact that members shouldn't do something for free," she says. In the end, the collective agreement was upheld, and Gruenig was again paid for having her pager on during lunch breaks.

The third victory dealt with overtime issues, but ended up improving staffing levels in the VGH cardiac ward. The department had an unusually low number of physiotherapists per patient, which meant that the physiotherapists ended up doing a significant amount of unpaid overtime.

"We put our foot down and said no, if there is overtime, we get paid for it. After a while we racked up quite a bit of overtime, and over the years we were able to work with practice and present our workload grievance to management. So now after years of advocating a new temporary position has been created."

Gruenig is also an HSA Constituency Liaison. In this position, her job is to advocate for the union, and the professions it represents, to her MLA and MP.

"We make appointments with them, give them information and have follow-up conversations. Sometimes it's as simple as informing them about who we are, what types of professions are in HSA, and what our issues are. Advocating for our people at the political level is so important. Politicians need to know who we are and what we do so they can advocate in the legislature for us," she says.

Gruenig also has a passion for teaching and has a part-time position as a clinical instructor teaching cardio-respiratory physiotherapy at UBC. The combination of part-time teaching and part-time clinical work is ideal, she says.

Gruenig joined HSA in 2007 and jumped right into active involvement. Her previous position, in Ontario, was non-unionized, and she was eager to learn how a union works and how it supports members.

The positive effects of being in a union were immediately obvious to Gruenig. "In the unionized workplace, I saw that people are more comfortable in their jobs, and there is less stress with the managers and the administration, because people know that if there are issues there is a collective agreement to back them up," she says.

Union activity also satisfies Gruenig's interest in the political process. She worked in the House of Commons during her undergraduate years (her first degree was in Human Kinetics) and was actively involved in municipal politics for several years at one point. She looks forward to the possibility of being active again in municipal and provincial politics when her children, now two and five, are older. But for now, she's fully engaged and motivated by her roles as teacher, union activist, and physiotherapist, helping a wide range of people breathe easier ... literally and figuratively. 

Type:

[The Report](#)

Topic:

[Health Science Professionals](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)