



Despite frustration, province inks new health deal

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Health science professionals will work longer hours, but get higher base pay, if a tentative deal announced Thursday is ratified.

The Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association and the provincial government announced the two-year tentative agreement Thursday, which includes a three per cent wage increase over the length of the deal as well as a return to a 37.5-hour work week. The new contract was negotiated under the co-operative gains mandate, which means the salary increases had to be funded through cost savings in other areas.

The union, which represents more than 17,000 employees working in 40 different professions ranging from lab and radiation technicians to physiotherapists and pharmacists, held rotating strikes in December, resulting in the postponement of some elective surgeries.

"It was a difficult bargaining climate," union president Reid Johnson said. "We came into this with a newly invented mandate for co-operative gains and it seemed it was being defined differently at different tables and that was very frustrating for our bargaining team. But we were able to work through that and come to an understanding with the government and got what we thought was a fair and reasonable contract."

Johnson said some of the cost savings will come from reversing the 1993 policy, which cut the work week from 37.5 hours to 36 hours.

"Over time what it has produced is a lot of overtime," he said. "Sometimes you can't get everything done in a shorter work day, so this is a way to find savings in the system."

The deal also makes permanent a wage premium of between nine per cent and 14 per cent for hospital pharmacists. Johnson said the premium is needed to help recruit and retain people in those positions.

Health Minister Margaret Mac-Diarmid said the deal wraps up the current round of bargaining for the entire sector.

"This agreement keeps patients needs at the forefront by ensuring service stability," she said in a news release.

"News of [Thursday's] tentative agreement means that we have now ratified or reached tentative agreements with all bargaining associations in the health sector."

The dates of ratification votes across the province haven't been set, but Johnson hopes the process will be complete by the end of February.

If approved the deal will be retroactive to April 1, 2012 and expire just over a year from now on March 31, 2012.

Johnson said that means the union will start preparing for the next round of negotiating this fall.

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