

UNA STAT

UNITED NURSES OF ALBERTA NEWS UPDATE FOR MEMBERS



In High River, UNA nurses brought their kids out for their rally and leafletting on main street.

Nurses put on pressure on health cuts

■ Alberta nurses are making it a hot summer for the provincial government and its plans for health budget cuts.

On June 30th the new Alberta Health Services announced a \$1 billion deficit but gave no indication of how they plan to handle it. Earlier in June the AHS had frozen hiring, beginning staff cuts, and rumours have been flying of hospital closures.

Nurses have been marching down mainstreet in Alberta cities and towns calling on the Alberta government to stop cuts to the public system. They've been meeting with MLAs, handing out leaflets to citizens and writing letters to newspapers in droves.

"Look at what has been achieved over the past month... it's incredible. There are not many (if any) MLA's that are not aware of the campaign now. Let's continue to keep them informed, and keep the heat turned up..." says Ros Gullickson from Local #301 at the University of Alberta Hospital.

On June 15 at the Local Presidents' meeting in Edmonton UNA Locals joined in with the Friends of Medicare More Health Cuts Wrong Way campaign, and nurses have been ratcheting up the activity level ever since.

Nurses in many communities have also had rallies and taken their issue to other organizations like the Barrhead town council. That got a headline in the Barrhead Leader: "Town council takes up nurses' cause".

Health care has been the hot news this summer in Alberta and nurses have been a big part of it.



UNA First Vice-President Bev Dick said Albertans must speak up for their public health system at a July 20th, Wrong Way rally in Medicine Hat.

Health budget projects whopping \$1 billion deficit

■ The Alberta Health Services board did not rule out borrowing money to cover its projected \$1 billion deficit when it announced the new budget on June 30.

But CEO Stephen Duckett spent most of his time talking about cost savings, including reducing costs by amalgamating the health region administrations, and specifically payroll departments.

Besides this amalgamation the other major cost control Duckett mentioned was moving 600 patients in Edmonton and Calgary acute care beds into long-term care. Health Minister Ron Liepert made the same reference. But there already are long wait times for admission to the limited long-term care facilities and the government has said it will not be funding new full service long-term care beds.

In response to the announcement, Liberal Leader David Swann pointed out that the deficit was ten times what the combined \$100 million deficit of the nine health regions had been just over a year ago.

"Albertans are going to pay very dearly for this mismanagement. It's clearly going to increase the complication rate, the wait times, the loss of life in the system if they do make those kinds of cuts," David Swann said.

Duckett said going into the fall, spending will continue to be capped at the same rate as the last fiscal quarter of 2008-09.

David Eggen from Friends of Medicare said Duckett is hiding the fact this means huge cuts. "You wouldn't be able to find those so-called efficiencies without making cuts to essential services. In essence, that's eight per cent of the budget and equates to one in 10 workers," he told the Edmonton Journal.

MLA Boutilier tossed from caucus for calling for more Long-term care

■ At the same time as Duckett is saying AHS will save money with more long-term care, Fort McMurray MLA Guy Boutilier was thrown out of the Conservative caucus for questioning the hold up of a promised long-term care facility in his riding.

But Boutilier must have muddled Duckett's pronouncements about moving people out of acute care into long term care, with the government's real strategy, which is to cut public health services and dampen public debate as much as possible.

"Boutilier challenged the premier's core strategy on health care," noted columnist Don Braid in the Calgary Herald. "Stelmach's inner group wants to take politics out of tough health decisions in communities all over the province...Boutilier refused to accept that. He said that by postponing the care centre, the government broke a promise made by the premier himself only last year."

Taking it to Health Minister Ron Liepert

■ Meeting with a red-faced and angry health minister wasn't what Local #115 President Kevin Champagne and Vice-President Kathleen Hamnett had in mind when they booked a meeting with Ron Liepert who also happens to be their local MLA.

Kathleen Hamnett reported later that Liepert was upset he was not forewarned about the small rally in front of his office. Kevin politely said he had let others know the meeting was that day and he did not have control of them coming out to show support. Liepert said "well you've got your 5-10 minutes of my time for the questions you sent me."

Kevin began addressing the responsibilities of Liepert's government and ministry to meet the terms of the Canada Health Act. Liepert was very defensive, asking for specific examples under the health act. He also said this was a federal issue not provincial.

Specific questions related to operations or delivery of health care put to Mr. Liepert were re-directed to Alberta Health Services. "AHS is responsible".

After about 5 minutes Liepert stood up and announced the meeting was over. "I am not having any discussions with the Union," he said.

Kevin had tried to talk about staffing levels & Patient care, the delisting of services, selling of the Holy Cross hospital, and the issue of needing more Long-term care beds and staff. Mr. Liepert referred to assisted living, which he said was working well in his view.

Helipad ploy fails "smell test"

■ Alberta Health Services sudden call to close emergency helipads at 8 facilities in the province, failed badly when it turned out there had been no Transport Canada ruling that they were inadequate.

"The helipad closure, on a pretty much fake pretext, may have just been a step to downgrading the emergency services at those facilities," says UNA's Director of Labour Relations David Harrigan. "It didn't take long for the media to get the truth on the topic, there was no regulatory necessity to close the helipads.

"Somebody is not giving us the straight goods here," Sundre Mayor Roy Cummings told the Edmonton Journal. "We don't think there is anything wrong with our helipad."

The Journal also quoted Dr. Michelle Warren, a Sundre family physician, who said the closure didn't pass the smell test when no one there has been told what's wrong with the helicopter landing pad.

Stephen Duckett told CBC Radio: "I think it's fairest to say that the helipads didn't meet the Transport Canada standards and so they were closed."

But CBC's Ron Wilson challenged that: "Transport Canada says differently. They say in fact it wasn't their decision it was the Alberta Health Services' Decision."

Duckett said "We couldn't fly helicopters on those places because they don't meet Transport Canada standards." And he added that "What we've done is temporarily closed those helipads while we were looking at what we are going to do. It has absolutely nothing to do with the financial situation we are in."

On his website blog Duckett says: "The Board Chair, Ken Hughes, has already apologized to the Alberta community for this decision and it is obviously one which I deeply regret. I am currently reading through piles of material about how this advice came to be given to me."

AHS Code of Conduct comes under fire for muzzling employees

■ Alberta Health Services is now promising to revise the new Code of Conduct for employees, after MLA Rachel Notley, UNA and other organizations suggested it takes away the democratic rights of employees to discuss health policy and advocate for good care.

A flurry of news media coverage ensued, including reports on UNA's grievance filed on the code. UNA said it asks employees to spy on each other and report colleagues if they suspect conduct violates the code.

"It's sort of McCarthyism," Director of Labour Relations David Harrigan, told the Calgary Herald. "We think it's unfair and we think it violates our collective agreement."

The Code has some of the broadest possible terms, including phrasing such as: "If your personal conduct could reasonably result in valid allegations or criticism from our fellow Albertans, then the conduct is questionable and may be improper."

UNA's grievance says "The overall tone of the policy, as well as the method of introduction is offensive, condescending and unreasonable."
