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THE VANCOUVER SUN

GPs reach impasse in salary talks

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Family doctors who provide care to hospitalized patients in the Fraser Health region and Vancouver Island say they will start winding down their work today and quit by the end of the month because of an impasse in salary negotiations with government.

The planned action by at least 70 doctors will leave hundreds of patients in at least nine hospitals without a general practitioner to coordinate their care in hospital.

Helen Carkner, spokeswoman for the Fraser Health Authority, said Wednesday the authority will try to bring in replacements or hire new recruits through contingency plans being drawn up in response to the "threatened job action."

But Fraser Health region executive Dr. Peter Hill acknowledged it would be daunting to find replacements because there are already numerous doctor shortages and job vacancies.

"We will be challenged but we will rise to the challenge. I'm confident patient care can be preserved and continued," said Hill, vice president of academic research and clinical system redesign.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons, in a meeting Wednesday afternoon with the hospital doctors, cautioned them that any withdrawal of services must be so gradual as to not compromise patient care.

The in-house hospital doctors said that once they quit their posts, they will go into private practices and make more money, and in the meantime, they will begin their retreat by not taking on newly admitted hospital patients as of today.

That means that specialists who work in hospitals will have to take over such care.

Ever since family doctors started giving up their hospital privileges several years ago, they have been replaced by full- and part-time hospitalists, who work on hourly contracts in medical institutions to oversee admissions, provide treatment and discharge patients.

Often they are called on to provide continuous care for hospitalized patients who don't have a family doctor of their own.

The issue has come to a head in the Fraser Health region, which includes Surrey, and Vancouver Island, because the contracts of the hospitalists in those areas are expiring first.

The hospital doctors have been negotiating their contract through a lawyer, Murray **Tevlin**, because they believe the B.C. Medical Association is not sensitive enough to their needs.

Health Minister George Abbott said in an interview Wednesday that the government offered the nearly 200 hospitalists in the province \$111 an hour.

IMAGES



Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun
 Doctors David Wilton (from left),
 Michael Paletta and Rod Tukker are
 among three physicians withdrawing
 hospital services.

If they were to accept the offer, tabled by the government this week, they would then qualify for a 10-per-cent raise over four years, the same fee increase ratified recently in a contract between the government and the B.C. Medical Association.

However, the doctors promptly rejected the government's proposal. They said \$111 an hour is only slightly more than what they have been receiving over the past four years and in some cases, actually less.

The \$111 an hour equates to about \$204,000 annually, based on a 40-hour work week -- plus benefits worth another 12.5 per cent. The doctors say they want substantially more, but won't state exactly how much.

The government maintains there are many such doctors who work more than 40 hours a week and earn up to \$250,000 a year.

According to the doctors and the Ministry of Health, family doctors in private practice gross an average of about \$135 an hour, before overhead expenses, which generally take a 40-per-cent bite out of their billings.

Since hospitalists don't have offices where they employ receptionists, nurses and incur numerous costs, the government believes the \$111 is a fair offer.

"I'm very disappointed in this turn of events," said Abbott. "It's unfair and inappropriate. But that doesn't diminish the importance we place on hospitalists," he said, adding "we don't want to lose them. We don't want to lose any family doctors."

Dr. Tricia Ewart, a hospitalist at Eagle Ridge Hospital, said 90 per cent of patients admitted through the emergency department or to medical wards in that facility are looked after by doctors such as herself.

Dr. Michael Paletta, who works at Royal Columbian Hospital, said his facility has been looking to hire five more such doctors to bolster the current level of about a dozen, but hasn't been able to find them, so he questions how it could function without any at all.

Dr. Wayne Demott, one of 13 Victoria hospitalists, said he is "bewildered" that the government is not more anxious to renew their contracts because "we're good for hospitals, for nurses and for patients since we understand their needs."

Dr. Dave Wilton, a hospitalist at Vancouver General and University of B.C. Hospitals, said contracts in the Vancouver Coastal health region will be expiring in a few months and if there isn't a better offer from government, he will quit.

He said he's already compiled a list of 40 family doctors in the region who are looking for associates to share their office space and workloads.

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HOSPITALISTS: WHO ARE THEY?

Since so many family doctors have surrendered hospital privileges, a new group of family doctors who provide care to hospitalized patients has emerged over the past five years.

They call themselves hospitalists and there are nearly 200 in B.C., serving from 30 to 90 per cent of admitted patients.

Illustration:

• Colour Photo: Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun / Doctors David Wilton (from left), Michael Paletta and Rod Tukker are among three physicians withdrawing hospital services.

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