

Emergency-room doctors call for more help

By Richard Watts, Times Colonist May 6, 2010

Emergency room doctors are raising concerns about staffing levels.

A Victoria emergency-room doctor joined his counterparts from around B.C. yesterday in warning that wait times for patients to see a physician are getting dangerously high.

“As they wait, morbidity rises. That means complications with whatever is wrong with them,” said Dr. Dennis McElgunn at the emergency room in Victoria General Hospital.

“And obviously, depending on what happens, mortality could rise.”

McElgunn said wait times at Victoria General can now extend to three or four hours. To reduce that, the 30-odd emergency-room specialists working at Victoria General and Royal Jubilee should have their numbers bolstered by at least four full-time doctors, he said.

McElgunn’s comments follow similar warnings by emergency-room doctors in Nanaimo, New Westminster and Kamloops earlier in the week. Emergency doctors at Lions Gate Hospital in North Vancouver are expected to follow suit today.

The public campaign involves emergency-room doctors at 19 departments throughout the province, which operate on a service contract with the government. The doctors draw a salary, as opposed to billing the province on a fee-for-service basis.

At issue is the failure of a joint government and medical committee to agree on a formula to determine how many emergency medical specialists are needed for any one emergency department.

Composed of representatives of both government and the B.C. Medical Association, the committee worked for two years without results before giving up in December. In the months since, attempts have been made to negotiate with individual health authorities, again without success.

Driving the call for more medical staff is increasing demand from patients in hospital emergency rooms.

According to the Vancouver Island Health Authority, about 42,000 patients turned up in Victoria General’s emergency room and 43,000 at Royal Jubilee in 2009-2010. That’s up from the year before, when about 38,400 reported to Victoria General emergency, and 40,200 to Royal Jubilee.

VIHA’s emergency-room procedures dictate that every patient is seen by a nurse upon entering, then assigned a priority based on the medical problem. Seeing a doctor, however, can take hours.

McElgunn said nobody in emergency medicine in B.C. is suggesting that patients stop coming. But he said they deserve satisfactory and prompt attention.

“We want to be able to deliver the care that we should be delivering in a reasonable time,” he said.

“We need the government to step up and say, ‘Gee, we need to solve the problem.’ ”

Health Minister Kevin Falcon said the province has committed more than \$400 million since 2001 to improve and expand emergency rooms around the province.

Last September, Victoria General Hospital opened a new, improved emergency room with \$18.5 million worth of equipment and construction.

Falcon said the government will continue to work with groups like the B.C. Medical Association to see that funding needs are addressed.