

## Health budget-cutting has hefty costs

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Nurses feeling pressure of increased workloads due to reduce overtime staffing.

The Vancouver Island Health Authority's strategies to save money this year are working, but the savings come at a cost. The health authority made its cost-saving initiatives public last October to deal with a \$45-million budget shortfall. Suzanne Germain, VIHA spokeswoman, said the health authority is on track for a balanced budget by March 31. The biggest reduction so far is in overtime, which has saved \$6.6 million, from \$26.8 million to \$20.2 million. Two surgical units at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital were among 10 departments specifically targeted.

"Not only does it cost us a lot of money, but it's not good for people," said Germain. "You can only work for so long before you get burnt out." Sharing relief staff among units and increased use of licensed practical nurses to make up for a shortage of registered nurses, as well as reducing sick days and injuries through education, were key to reducing overtime.

But Jo Taylor, chairwoman of the Pacific Rim for the B.C. Nurses' Union, said the new overtime policy is frustrating for nurses, who are forced to work shorthanded because sick calls are sometimes not replaced or a regular-time nurse is unavailable.

"This all increases workload and it will impact patient care," she said. "Morale is even worse than it was before." Taylor said at NRGH, many units work short-staffed, nurses are being shuffled from floor to floor even if they haven't been orientated to the floor and work that RNs are supposed to do is being given to LPNs or care aides.

"They're de-skilling, that's the best way to describe it," she said. "They're pushing the LPNs to work outside their scope of practice."

Mike Old, spokesman for the Hospital Employees' Union, agreed the overtime strategy means fewer people doing more work.

"Workload is a huge issue," he said. "There's inevitable consequences for quality of patient care." A further \$8 million was saved by eliminating non-essential maintenance jobs, reducing travel and not filling or delaying to fill vacant positions in non-clinical or administrative areas.

"Some folks take on additional work and some stuff that used to get done doesn't get done or gets done slower," said Germain. "We can live with something being slower, we cannot live with somebody not getting care." Routine MRIs and elective surgeries have also suffered.

Islanders will get 18,500 MRIs this year, ballooning the wait time for Nanaimo's one machine to 18 months from about 4.5 months in the 2008-09 budget.

"It was a tough decision we had to make, but the demand for MRIs is skyrocketing as the technology becomes more useful and is used more," said Germain, adding that people will also wait longer for certain elective surgeries, such as hernia or varicose vein operations.

A \$2-million revenue increase, which has come mainly from increased parking fees, also helped to narrow the shortfall. A previous decision requiring Nanaimo's Meals on Wheels Society to raise their prices by about 20 per cent – charging \$6 per meal instead of \$5.05 – was overturned last week.

Society treasurer Brian Smith said this means clients will not have to pay the almost \$300 annual increase for their meals.

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