

Vancouver Island hospital laying off 30-35 nurses

By Christiana Wiens, Canwest News Service March 31, 2010

COMOX — St. Joseph's General Hospital will be laying off nurses to save money and cut the level of medical support for senior patients waiting for placement in old age homes.

Hospital CEO Michael Pontus announced this week that the hospital will create a transitional care unit out of acute care beds to save about \$1 million a year. Because transitional care units need fewer registered nurses than acute care beds, the B.C. Nurses Union will lose 25.5 full-time equivalent positions.

That means about 30 to 35 nurses here will lose their jobs, said Jo Taylor, the BCNU chair for the Central and North Island.

"These numbers are going to be so devastating for staff," said Taylor, "They're already going through restructuring. They took away one RN shift and another supervisor. The morale is just so low already."

St. Joe's has also filed legal notice to health technicians and licensed practical nurses, although far fewer positions will be cut.

The BC Labour Code requires employers to give unions 60 days notice before significantly changing in service levels or cutting a large amount of staff.

Taylor expects more nurses to be displaced in Comox than anywhere else in her area. "The RN's are out of jobs," she said. Cuts have been so long in coming at St. Joe's that there simply are no vacant areas for nurses to fill.

And, since the hospital is not owned by VIHA, they can't be transferred to other Island facilities unless a special agreement is signed.

As medical beds transfer to transitional care beds, registered nurses take a more supervisory role and the hospital needs fewer of them to manage large numbers of patients.

"The creation of this new transitional care unit will require a change in our wards and a change from the skill sets currently provided by nurses to the skill sets of care aides and rehabilitation aides needed for the care of transitional patients," said St. Joe's president and CEO Michael Pontus.

In 1990, more than half of the surgeries at St. Joe's required an inpatient stay. A decade later, only 27 per cent of the hospital's patients with surgeries stay overnight.

The whole process accounts for a systematic shift in the system that requires 10,000 fewer acute inpatient days at St. Joe's per year.

However, the shift has not caught up with large populations of aging patients who can't always go home.

St. Joe's has 20 to 25 seniors (on average) waiting for placement daily.

Instead of taking up acute care beds and staff time, the new transitional care unit moves all the seniors and patients waiting for placement to one ward, where they are tended to with less expensive staff.

"The move to this new unit will require a different staff and skill mix," said Pontus. "We are committed to working with our staff and their unions in order to make this process as smooth as possible especially for any employees whose jobs are impacted by this change."

The hospital says the total number of beds at St. Joe's will not be cut.

The money saved will help manage the demand on the hospital's services as the Valley's population grows.

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