

Driftwood Editorial - VIHA report and the community pulse

Gulf Islands Driftwood

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The Vancouver Island Health Authority's long-awaited Salt Spring Health Review, released last week, is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in health care on Salt Spring.

For people who've heard the rumblings about or experienced the results of staff shortages, lack of services for dealing with mental illness and the ever-increasing demand for seniors care, the VIHA report lays it out in simple terms, with data, analysis and input from stakeholders.

Regarding mental health issues, data shows that from 2003 to 2007 the Gulf Islands had a 12 per cent higher suicide rate than the rest of the VIHA region and 31 per cent higher than in B.C. And in fiscal 2007/08, depressive episodes were the number one cause of inpatient cases at Lady Minto Hospital (37), accounting for 558 patient days. Other figures show how hospital services are largely used by seniors, with diseases and disorders associated with aging dominating much of the "top 10" list for 2007/08 and 2008/09.

High demand for seniors care beds is also highlighted. Among VIHA hospitals, Lady Minto "had the fourth highest number of days in hospital for patients whose main reason for care was that they were waiting for placement in a residential care facility."

Any time an established service like a hospital's surgery is discontinued it's a loss for the community. But VIHA makes its case that in a time of fiscal restraint and skills shortages, it doesn't make sense to maintain an OR except for endoscopies done by visiting specialists, since endoscopies formed the bulk of procedures done here anyway.

The recommendation to not return to the previous level of surgical services was predictable. VIHA likely knew before the OR was shut down in 2008 that it did not want a return to the previous situation and was disingenuous in not stating so at the time. However, the lack of widespread outcry and what appears to be medical staff support for a reallocation in resources indicates that it may ultimately be the right decision. Now, VIHA must be pressed to accomplish what the health review indicates it can do to address gaps in service on the island.

The review is available on VIHA's website and a public meeting will likely occur within the next few weeks. It will be easy to get up to speed and help make that happen.