

Saltspring hospital might lose its operating room VIHA: Facility performs too few surgeries to be viable

By Richard Watts, Times Colonist June 9, 2010

The Vancouver Island Health Authority is recommending closing the operating room at Lady Minto Hospital on Saltspring Island -- a move some islanders fear will turn the facility into little more than "a glorified nursing home."

In a review of health services on Saltspring, which will go to the community for comment later this month, the health authority notes the hospital doesn't have a general surgeon -- the last one retired in 2008 -- and recommends not filling the position. The review says the hospital does too few surgeries to remain viable, and instead, cases should be sent to Royal Jubilee and Victoria General hospitals.

But Phyllis Bolton, a Saltspring Island nurse turned real estate agent who has worked to keep the operating room open, says without surgery, the hospital becomes little more than a nursing home. "When we don't have an operating room and surgical services, the hospital becomes something less than a real, functioning, acute-care hospital," Bolton says.

Sending people to Greater Victoria for surgeries can take several hours, and removes them from the support of friends and family, she says.

Lady Minto, which opened in 1958, has 19 acute-care beds and 31 extended-care beds. It's the largest of the rural hospitals operated by the health authority and the only one where surgeries are performed. Hospitals in Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Cormorant Island and Tofino don't have operating rooms. Lady Minto, located in Ganges, primarily serves Saltspring's population of just under 10,000, although it's also used by the wider population of the Gulf Islands.

Its operating room underwent a \$3-million renovation in 2005, paid for in part by \$1.1 million from the Capital Regional District and \$800,000 raised by the Lady Minto Hospital Foundation. The remainder came from the health authority.

In addition to the operating room, the hospital has a post-operative recovery room, a minor procedure room and laboratory. Staff provide chemotherapy, cardiac testing and physiotherapy.

The report is recommending the space and money previously used by the operating room be directed to other programs, such as rehabilitation and physiotherapy targeting Saltspring's large elderly and late-middle-aged population. Mental-health programs were also identified as a pressing need.

Grant Hollett, VIHA's director of planning and community engagement and author of the report, says keeping surgeries at Lady Minto makes little economic sense.

The low volume of surgeries -- an average of 150 a year over the past 18 years, or 18 per cent of Lady Minto's cases -- makes it hard for surgeons and other operating-room staff to maintain high-quality skills. The low volume also means costs are higher than in bigger hospitals, where operating rooms are busier. In other hospitals on Vancouver Island with operating rooms, surgeries account for at least 45 per cent of their cases.

Since Lady Minto lacks intensive-care facilities, it's restricted to simple cases. The report cites minor hernia repairs and endoscopies as the most common surgical cases prior to 2008.

That makes it difficult to attract younger surgeons, nurses and other operating-room staff, since they're looking for broader experience in the operating room, Hollett says. "They might be attracted to the busier, sexier care programs and services that happen in a larger community."

Older surgeons have been more willing to work there, but they retire in a few years, which has created a revolving door in staff. "We might go through two or three iterations of general surgeons who come on board for two to three years and then move on to retirement and then we'll just have to find another one," he says.

The recommendations will be the subject of a community meeting this month.

Bolton, who has helped form an advocacy group, Save Our Surgery, says many people on Saltspring feel betrayed in light of previous assurances from high-level officials pledging support for the operating room.

In 2006, VIHA president Howard Waldner told the Times Colonist that it was "absolutely our intent" to keep surgery at Lady Minto. During last year's provincial election campaign, Saanich North and the Islands MLA Murray Coell called it his first priority to see surgeries continue at Lady Minto.

Coell now says he regrets what's happening, but noted that Saltspring is not alone. "With rural hospitals all over the province, we are having a difficult time attracting doctors and nurses."

But Gary Holman, former Saltspring director on the Capital Regional District board, isn't convinced by the cost argument.

"I'm sure the cost benefit isn't that good, but it's still an essential service for an island," Holman says. "All you need is one or two [close medical calls] and that changes the cost benefit quite considerably."

rwatts@tc.canwest.com

<http://www.timescolonist.com/health/Saltspring+hospital+might+lose+operating+room/3130284/story.html>