



Community sounds off against VIHA

Despite vocal opposition heard at a June 14 meeting, VIHA insists the Lady Minto operating room will remain closed for all procedures except medical endoscopies.

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BY ELIZABETH NOLAN

A crowd of islanders filled the GISS multipurpose room Monday night to voice opinions on the controversial Salt Spring Island Health Review.

At least 120 people were on hand for the presentation and question period facilitated by report author Grant Hollett. Also in attendance were several Vancouver Island Health Authority directors, including chief medical health officer Dr. Richard Stanwick, Lady Minto site manager Bill Relph and hospital chief of staff Dr. Shane Barclay.

Hollett opened the floor to questions after a half-hour presentation on his methodology and his resulting recommendation to permanently close Lady Minto's surgery.

In regard to community concern about greater closure, Hollett stated, "There is absolutely no intention to close your hospital."

The intention, he said, is to make changes that are sustainable and feasible for the next 20 years.

Stanwick emphasized the VIHA plan is not "a budget reduction exercise" that will herald in additional funding cuts. He pointed out hospitals that once offered surgery but no longer do, such as Tofino, Port Hardy and Port McNeill, are "still going strong."

Residents who asked questions or made comments during the meeting were overwhelmingly opposed to the surgery closure.

They cited the contribution made by the community to renovate the operating room just a few years ago and the discomfort and expense for people travelling off island for surgical procedures. Several speakers questioned VIHA statistics and motivations.

In response, Hollett and Stanwick repeatedly stated their position that only a small number of general surgeries were taking place on Salt Spring and that new research finds patient risk is minimized when a high volume of surgeries are performed by specialized teams.

During the question period, Vivian Dawson of the Lady Minto Hospital Auxiliary read aloud a letter she received from VIHA president and chief executive officer Howard Waldner dated June 30, 2008. Waldner then wrote: "VIHA recognizes Salt Spring Island's strong connection to Lady Minto Hospital and we are committed to maintaining a surgical program on the island."

"VIHA is committed to ensuring that the residents of Salt Spring Island have access to the quality health care services they need, including surgeries that can be appropriately and safely provided in the community hospital setting," he concluded.

Dawson questioned whether VIHA administrators had any credibility in light of an about-face from their previous statements.

VIHA credibility was further questioned by Cherie Geauvreau and Phyllis Bolton of the Save Our Surgery committee. Geauvreau noted the organization has so far failed to supply documents for a freedom of information request filed by the group last fall with a January 2010 deadline for compliance. Bolton said the review should have been performed by someone at arm's length from VIHA rather than an employee of the organization. Hollett is director of VIHA's planning and community engagement department.

CRD director Garth Hendren echoed past director Gary Holman's concerns that VIHA had requested and received \$1.1 million through the CRD for renovations.

"I have asked staff at the CRD how to recoup the amount put into the surgery because now we don't have a surgery . . . I think we could probably use that money to establish our own surgery," he said.

Hollett's response to that and similar comments was that the bulk of the money contributed by the CRD and the community had gone into "bricks and mortar" and therefore was well-used regardless of how the space is dedicated. He said equipment that was purchased could be sold and that money returned to the community for other health needs.

In regard to residents' questioning whether suggested improvements to mental health and seniors services would ever be implemented, Hollett said VIHA has money ready to go into the review's short-term recommendations immediately.

The lone voice of support came from Jean Taylor, chair of the Greenwoods Elder Care Society board.

"We very much appreciate the depth of the study that was done," she said, adding she looked forward to getting more beds and services for seniors in the future.

Despite community pressure, Hollett stayed committed to his recommendations throughout the evening.

"In my mind I was actually trying to be an ambassador for your needs," he said, noting he successfully argued to keep medical endoscopy at Lady Minto.

In the end he promised to try to build a better relationship with the community.

"We're in it for the long haul," he said.