

Viewpoint - VIHA's surgery ruse exposed

Gulf Islands Driftwood

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The Vancouver Island Health Authority's Salt Spring Island Health Review has recommended the permanent closure of the surgical suite at Lady Minto Hospital. Much rumour, information and disinformation has been circulated. It is time to review the facts.

1. In 2004 a state-of-the-art surgical facility opened at a total cost of \$2,780,000, funded by a \$1,100,000 grant from the Capital Regional District, as requested by VIHA, along with their \$1,000,000 contribution. The \$780,000 remainder was supplied by the Lady Minto Hospital Foundation by donations from Salt Spring residents. After completion, the general surgeon Dr. Roy Preshaw's services were contracted for two four-hour days a week. The surgery was never fully staffed nor funded.
2. In late 2007, Dr. Preshaw was asked for his resignation by VIHA. Why? Rather than be fired, he agreed to resign on the condition that he be allowed to continue on the same contractual basis until June 30, 2008.
3. When word of closure reached the community, Salt Spring residents sought and received written assurances from VIHA president Howard Waldner that closure was temporary.
4. When the surgery was not reopened and doubts were expressed as to VIHA's intention of reopening the OR, the nurses association (BCNU) convened a well-attended public meeting at the Fritz theatre and as a result of doubts raised during the meeting, your Ad Hoc Save-Our Surgery Committee was formed.
5. Committee members met with VIHA. The result of that meeting was the June 1, 2009 public meeting at the Community Gospel Chapel where the then chief medical officer Dr. Owen Heisler presented unconvincing statements as to the sincerity of recruitment process for a replacement general surgeon and one of our local doctors diverted the audience's attention away from the purpose for which the meeting was held; namely, the reopening of the OR. From that meeting one could deduce the VIHA strategy was to divide-to-conquer proponents for restoration of the surgery and those supporting other under-funded legitimate community needs such as mental health and elder care.
6. When it appeared that VIHA was stalling, your committee met with MLA Murray Coell to make good on his pre-election promise to make his number one priority the reopening of our surgery. We requested that Coell arrange a meeting with Health Minister Kevin Falcon and for Coell to personally attend. This did not happen. Instead, the committee received word that the above named study would be carried out.
7. The review was short on substance, contained incorrect information, and was flawed by the misuse of statistical data.
8. We have obtained an internal email from a Mr. Knype, a VIHA employee — before the study was initiated — stating that plans were in place to remove \$150,000 from the LMH surgical budget to “address the fiscal challenges that VIHA is facing.”

Why engage in such an elaborate ruse? It makes no sense to build a multimillion dollar surgery and not fund staff for its operation, especially in light of longer wait times, inconvenience and expense for patients in having general surgical procedures performed at other hospitals.

Look to what has happened in other jurisdictions under VIHA's administration and other health authorities throughout our province: typically a policy of centralization in the large population centres and reduction in the services provided to smaller communities. These policies have been pursued to the detriment of locally provided health care and a loss of jobs in the community. Furthermore, they have created large soulless bureaucracies more dedicated to their dysfunctional policies than the needs of the people they are appointed to serve.

Your SOS committee has a new website where you can explore, in detail, press releases, letters from VIHA officials, statements made to the press and commentary regarding the closure of surgery. That site is also a forum to express your thoughts on this important issue.

The writer is an SOS committee member.

http://www.bclocalnews.com/vancouver_island_south/saltspringislanddriftwood/opinion/97426454.html