

IHA admits it needs to heed warnings from front-line staff

Following three incidents of contaminated surgical equipment over a two-week period in February, the Interior Health Authority (IHA) was forced to cancel a week's worth of elective surgeries at Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops.

Audits of the facility's sterile supply processes were ordered and when the first findings were released, they echoed warnings that sterile supply technicians had been sending to management and supervisors for almost two years.

Along with surgeons and other hospital staff, these HEU members had sounded the alarm about aging and malfunctioning equipment,

workload issues, and insufficient supplies.

The health authority admitted they should have been listening to front-line workers all along.

In a report from the *Kamloops Daily News*, Thompson-Cariboo-Shuswap medical director Jon Slater said the hospital would no longer be "rushing things through" and would wait until they had enough surgical sets to schedule increased surgeries.

Slater acknowledged that staff, "are working as hard as they can in that environment. And we've recognized we need to allow them to say when they need more time."

HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy says

she's hopeful this will not only be a lesson for employers, but will also encourage HEU members to continue raising their concerns.

"Workers' perspectives are a huge asset for flagging issues and generating solutions before they become a crisis," says Darcy.

"Employers must spend more time acting on this valuable first-hand knowledge of our health care system's operations."

HEU ad wins top international award

An HEU radio spot on the challenges faced by B.C. families looking for long-term care has won a top international advertising award.

"Every Call" was awarded

first place in the International Public Affairs category by the American Association of Political Consultants at the "Pollies" award ceremony in Phoenix on March 27.

The "Pollies" are the Academy Awards of political advertising. In 2004, HEU took second place in the International Television category for the TV ad "Disturbing Results." In 2006, HEU received an Honourable Mention in the same category for "Closed" – our pre-election ad featuring a rolling list of hospital closures.

But this is the first time HEU's claimed gold in a Pollie Award category.

"Every Call" was part of HEU's pre-election Stand Up for Seniors' Care campaign

and ran in late January 2009. You can listen to it in the Media Room on the HEU website. You can find out more about the Pollies at <www.theaapc.org>.

CSS workers raise public awareness

For the third year in a row, HEU members working in community social services took their public awareness campaign into the malls and into the streets to raise the profile of the critical work they do to support some of B.C.'s most vulnerable citizens.

The campaign was launched in 2008 to shine a spotlight on this often invisible sector, which has suffered from years of chronic underfunding and cutbacks.

BALANCING IT ALL

PATTY GIBSON

Over the past decade, **KIM SLATER** has become a tenacious advocate for seniors in residential care and the front-line staff who support them.

FIGHTING FOR BETTER CARE

When Kim Slater's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2001, he knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy.

And like many family members who place a loved one in care, he was prepared to tackle a steep learning curve to find out more about how the system works, what supports his mom would require, and how her disease would progress over time.

Nine years later, however, Slater has been through an incredible advocacy journey that has spanned the creation of an informal family support network at Nanaimo Seniors Village in 2004 – which became a family council – to the recent formation of a family council association on Vancouver Island.

Advocacy, he admits, takes a lot of time. "You have to advocate at all levels. There's the facility level, what's happening on the floor. If it's a for-profit facility, you also have to advocate on the doorstep of the company involved. Then you have to advocate with the health authority and with the province. You can't just advocate at one level because they are all interconnected."

A recently retired teacher, an active sports coach and the proud father of "four amazing sons," Slater has put thousands of hours into advocating for his own mother's needs, and those of other seniors. He's also stood up for the care staff at Nanaimo Seniors Village, who have been pink-slipped on sev-

eral different occasions due to contracting out and contract-flipping.

"Bottom line," he says. "if staff are treated with respect and given stability, then care for seniors improves. If you don't value staff, and if care is constantly disrupted, you don't have the level or continuity of care families want for their loved ones."

"Frankly, this shouldn't even be an issue. But in

my opinion, the current government doesn't see health care workers as critical to the care seniors receive. It sees them as liabilities on a ledger sheet."

Slater is also critical of the Vancouver Island Health Authority.

"VIHA has not been partners with family

members in trying to improve levels of care," he says, pointing out that families are often afraid to get involved in an advocacy role.

"There is real potential to engage families in a proactive role, rather than seeing them as troublemakers who interrupt other agendas."

His hope is that government will act on the recommendations of B.C.'s Ombudsperson Kim Carter, whose office conducted a major investigation into the state of seniors' care in B.C.

Of Carter's three major recommendations – a bill of rights for seniors, an expanded role for family councils entrenched in legislation, and a provincial

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NANAIMO DAILY NEWS PHOTO

website with detailed information on each facility – only the first has been adopted by government.

Slater says that's just not good enough. Without a recognized advocacy role for family councils and transparent, accessible information on all residential care facilities, the seniors' bill of rights "is little more than a poster on a wall."

"The only way to make the bill of rights meaningful is to act on the other two recommendations," he says.

As to what needs to happen to improve seniors' care in B.C., Slater identifies four key areas.

First, a commitment to continuity of care, which can't happen when contracts are flipped. Second, a willingness on the part of the health authority to work in partnership with families to improve seniors' care. Third, the ability to access timely information from the health authority and the province. And finally, rescinding provincial legislation that facilitates ongoing privatization and contracting out.

Beyond his advocacy focus, Slater also tries to help in other ways at the Village. He's fundraised for Alzheimer's, purchased and donated an old piano for the secured ward, helped to enhance gardens, and built supportive relationships with other family members.

Based on his own experience, he encourages family members not only to advocate for their loved ones, but also to get involved in facility activities and help out however they can.

"Partnerships and volunteering," he muses, "that's what makes the world go round."