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## Hospital cleaning worries staff; Cleaners say they were told to cut corners. Workers warn that NRGH's lack of employees is cause for concern

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Illustrations: Photo: Glenn Olsen, Daily News / Cleaning staff say they have been told to spot-mop floors at the NRGH.

Photo: (Hank) Compeau

Three women working for a contractor responsible for keeping Nanaimo Regional General Hospital clean say they are being asked to cut corners and the cleanliness of the facility is being compromised.

The women say that understaffing has created pressures resulting in inadequate cleaning. The trio say they have been told to work faster by not mopping entire floors, not dusting everywhere, and in one case a woman said her supervisor gave her a "priority list" highlighting what had to be done and what could be left unfinished.

They also say that when cleaners are shifted to work in areas like operating rooms or the emergency department, they get no training or instruction about cleaning those areas.

The women work for Crothall Services, under the Compass Group, which took over cleaning at NRGH when Bill 29 privatized cleaning services in B.C. in 2002. Fearing they will be fired for speaking out, the women asked that their real names not be used. All are members of the Health Employees' Union.

"Margaret" said that when she was expected to do a job she had not done before, she asked to see a list of tasks.

"I asked what he wanted me to do, and he highlighted what he wanted," said Margaret. "I didn't have to do mopping anywhere."

As for the rest of the tasks, she said, there was no one else there to do them and, as far as she knows, they were never completed.

"I don't think it was done, I just did what he wanted me to do."

Another woman said that shortcuts are the only way that cleaners can complete their tasks in the time they are given.

"Chloe" said they have been told to mop floors only where it is obviously dirty and to leave the rest as long as it appears clean.

Chloe is bothered by that, knowing that cleanliness is imperative in certain areas.

"I always try to keep certain areas cleaner than clean

because of the people treated there," she said.

"We balked at the idea that the entire floor doesn't need to be washed. You can't spot wash."

"Liz" also said they are expected to undertake tasks that even the managers know cannot be completed. All three women say the problem is a lack of staff.

"The cleaning's not being done properly, the workload is so big you're cutting corners all the time," she said.

Liz also said that when someone calls in sick the workload only gets bigger and less manageable, and staff are pulled off regular duties to cover more important areas, like emergency or operating rooms.

Chloe said they have been told that cleaning a bathroom means, "the sink, toilet, garbage and out." Similarly the order for bedrooms is the bed, the sink and the garbage before quickly moving on.

"If you're constantly pulling people to cover other areas, you are short on staff," she said. "There are areas being neglected to make other areas look good."

Brenda Brown, a spokeswoman for Compass/Crothall in Toronto, noted that the contract with the HEU expires in 2008, and that the union strongly opposes privatized cleaning. But she said the cleaners have a role in patient care that mean "no compromises" in cleaning.

"If it is not happening, if it is not protocol and when we find that is the case, we will deal with it," said Brown.

Audits are done regularly, and one on Monday -- a joint audit with Crothall -- was posted a week in advance.

"Please ensure that your area will pass the audit. Ensure that all high dusting, floors (corners and edges) bed frames, bedside tables and all other areas meet standards," stated the notice.

Hank Compeau, VIHA's corporate director of general support, said it is not VIHA's policy to post when joint audits will occur. Compeau said VIHA also does its own unannounced spot audits.

"We can only assume they (Crothall) probably put it up for their staff," said Compeau.

Brown said Monday's audit was one of a number of joint quarterly audits with VIHA that are not meant to be a surprise. They are a check, she said, that includes encouraging and motivating staff. She said the greater focus is on random audits by VIHA.

"Those are the ones that really get the attention," said Brown.

NRGH passed Monday's audit with a score of 88.55%. Compeau said 75% to 80% indicates problems; 80% to 90% is standard; and above 90% is exceptional.

He also said that NRGH has been overcrowded for several weeks. He and Brown said that is putting additional strain on housekeeping staff.

"It's been really rough in the past few weeks," said Compeau.

But he expressed concern about the spot mopping and priority lists.

"That (the spot mopping) disturbs me greatly and that's something I will be following up on," he said.

About the priority lists he said, "we expect patient areas to be thoroughly cleaned and I'll be looking into that."

Margaret said the only solution is hiring and training more cleaners.

Hiring levels were set in a 2004 contract, and Compeau said staffing has been increased according to the contract.

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