

Policy tables, education, job security and wages lead patient care bargaining priorities

HEU concluded its facilities occupational conference series last week as more than 150 patient care members gathered in Richmond for the two-day forum to discuss their work and challenges, and brainstorm on ways to strategize around the bargaining priorities they deemed pertinent to their job family.

Representing nearly 50 per cent of the union's membership, the patient care team includes licensed practical nurses, care aides (residential and acute), activity aides, activity workers, therapeutic and rehabilitation assistants, recreation therapists, orthopaedic technologists, porters and supervisors, among others – who work in acute care hospitals and long-term care facilities throughout B.C.

HEU's secretary-business manager Judy Darcy received a standing ovation when introduced by Nursing Team co-chair and Provincial Executive member Jacqueline Zilkie, an LPN from the Kaslo local.



Darcy thanked participants for demonstrating leadership and for taking on the responsibility of representing colleagues from their work sites. She talked about the patient care team's critical role as patient/resident advocates, and credited them for helping to address the nursing shortage, reduce wait times and decrease length of hospital stays.

"The public does not know what work HEU members do," said Darcy. "They don't get it, so your stories have to get out into your communities. It's critical that they understand your work as we go into bargaining."

Participants moved into occupation-based caucuses to discuss their work, their challenges, and their part in delivering quality health care, and later made presentations to the large plenary about the value of that work.

Why patient care "work matters"

Recurring themes during the large plenary report back included a strong sense of team work, taking pride in one's occupation, bringing heart to the job, and a consensus that all HEU members make a difference to the health care system.

...more

“We need everybody to make this team go,” said one LPN. “We’re professionals. It takes everyone working together – care aides, porters, activity aides, rehab assistants, support workers – everyone.”

“Because of our expanded scope of practice and shortage of RNs, we are the keys to health care,” added another LPN. “There’s more pressure on LPNs to deal with day-to-day nursing in a crisis situation.”

“Rehabilitation Assistants: professional partners in your rehab journey. We care and we’re there,” was the slogan for the team of rehab assistants attending the conference.



“We give purpose, value and meaning to the residents’ lives,” said an activity worker. “We treat residents like individuals, not children, and bring a feeling of ‘home’ to them during activities, so that they feel wanted, loved and needed.”

“I’m a care aide and I love my job,” noted one long-term care participant, as she outlined the differences in the level and

quality of seniors’ care options. “Public or private care – let your parents decide, not the government.”

“HEU is the backbone of patient care,” explained a nurse aide. “We hold everything up.”

“Acute care aides are the bridge over troubled waters,” added her colleague. “We’re picking up the slack and keeping everyone on track”

“If we don’t move, no one moves,” announced a patient porter to tremendous applause and laughter.

Workplace challenges cross all occupational lines

Although this session provided levity and humour, the patient care team also reported on the many obstacles that make their daily jobs difficult.

These include: inconsistent utilization and training standards; patients/residents with higher acuity levels and mental health issues; health and safety (such as heavy lifting, exposure to infectious diseases, physical violence and verbal abuse); working under-staffed or short-staffed; physical environment (cluttered hallways, lack of equipment or supplies); poor continuity in scope of practice; downloading and offloading of duties due to skills shortages in other areas, and lack of recognition or compensation for increased educational requirements, duties and responsibilities.

“After hours, we become unit clerks, housekeepers, switchboard and staffing – jack-of-all-trades,” noted an orthopaedic technologist.

...more

During her keynote bargaining address, Darcy spoke about the union's uphill battle in the next round of negotiations, primarily the government's health care budget cuts and public-sector wage freeze. She also acknowledged the serious challenge of having to deal with BCNU's attempt to raid LPNs from HEU and other health care unions.

"This is a challenge to our internal solidarity, to the solidarity of the labour movement," said Darcy. "This is happening at the very time that health care unions need to be standing together and be united against cuts and privatization. Yet, we have one union spending millions of dollars trying to raid other unions. This is incredibly divisive and does the government's work for it."



Utilization of LPNs and Care Aides

She also spoke on specific issues like the proposed Care Aide Registry to deal with utilization, competency, standards and abuse. "The implementation has slowed down pending a process to ensure that public and private institutions teach to the same standards," said Darcy. "We will need all of your support with outreach to care aides – but we need support from everyone in patient care, including LPNs."

Darcy then discussed LPN-specific concerns like utilization, working to full scope, and having consistent training/education standards. "It's absolutely critical that we support each other in order to have influence with employers and government, and make bargaining gains in patient care," she said.

"There are issues that are specific to LPNs, issues important to care aides, to porters, to rehab assistants with their added duties and responsibilities that we need to support, if we're going to be successful at the bargaining table. I ask you to reach deep in your hearts and in the spirit of solidarity to support issues that may not affect you directly, but may be important to another job group."

Bargaining with strength and unity

"Given the economic and political landscape, we have to know our strengths, our weaknesses, our threats," said Darcy. "In this round of bargaining, we have to protect what we already have and make gains where it's possible... We know that HEU members are the solution. And that's critical to our strength as we go to the bargaining table."

"HEU has five occupational groups – patient care, patient care technical, clerical, trades and maintenance, and support – and they are all vital to the health care team. If they try to pick us off one by one, we know what'll happen – we'll be divided and weak. But if we stand together and support each other, we'll come out of this round of bargaining strong and united."

Bargaining priorities identified

After small group and large plenary discussions, the patient care team reached consensus on their bargaining priorities.

They include:

- special/labour market adjustments for those classifications where we can make the case for recruitment and retention and increased responsibility;
- wage steps/levels to recognize growing education, experience, responsibility and scope of practice;
- job security with an emphasis on no contracting out (including P3s), successorship, expanded seniority for postings and bumping, re-training funds for displaced workers, reinstate Health Labour Adjustment Agency (HLAA);
- wage adjustment for rehabilitation assistants to properly reflect their new benchmark and scope of practice;
- education fund for training, education and skills upgrading (with an emphasis on better funding and access), and
- maintain and renew policy tables.

Following acknowledgements from the Nursing Team subcommittee, HEU president Ken Robinson and financial secretary Donisa Bernardo concluded the conference.

Robinson acknowledged the vital work HEU members perform 24 hours a day, seven days a week to ensure British Columbians receive quality health care services.

“You know that your work matters,” said Robinson. “Your leadership knows that your work matters. And we’ll make sure that the government and health employers know that your work matters. Standing together, we can gain the respect and the working conditions that all workers deserve in this province.”

Solidarity and support

Bernardo reiterated the importance of solidarity and supporting the bargaining priorities of other occupational groups.

“The work you do every day is impressive,” said Bernardo. “It’s clear that you bring a lot of heart and passion to your jobs – and that your top priority is always – your patients and residents.

“These occupational conferences are one of the many ways we’re preparing for bargaining,” she continued. “And it’s important that we stay united and focused – and not let the tactics of health authorities or government deter us from reaching our goals. The work doesn’t stop here. This is just the beginning.”

September 30, 2009