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Segregation of health care providers from public forums undermines “health conversation,” say unions

The provincial government should reverse its plan to exclude health care providers from the 16 regional public forums that are the centerpiece of the \$10-million “Conversation on Health.”

Health union leaders told Health Minister George Abbott today that the government’s plan to declare more than 100,000 British Columbians who are health care providers as ineligible to participate in the public meetings will deepen public skepticism of the consultation process.

Citizens who register to be one of the 100 participants randomly selected for the 16 regional forums – but identify themselves as health care professionals – will be segregated from the public meetings.

The unions say health care providers should be able to engage in the public forums on the same basis as other citizens who live, work and access health care in their communities. And citizens also have the right to hear from those who deliver health care services directly to their families.

“Excluding health care providers from a dialogue with their neighbours about strengthening health care flies in the face of the premier’s promise of an ‘inclusive, exhaustive public discussion,’” says Hospital Employees’ Union secretary-business manager Judy Darcy.

“What will government gain from segregating local health care providers from their community? How will we find health care solutions together if health care providers are set apart?”

B.C. Nurses’ Union president Debra McPherson says nurses and other health care providers have parents in care facilities and kids who get sick – just like everyone else in their communities.

“Why is it that a barber or accountant or road builder or teacher has the right to be part of a citizen’s conversation about health care while a nurse does not?” says McPherson.

And Health Sciences Association executive director Maureen Headley says that citizens have the right to hear from health science professionals in their community. “We have first-hand knowledge about what’s working in health care delivery – and what’s not. The public dialogue would benefit greatly from these perspectives.”

B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union president George Heyman says health care providers in acute care and community health have direct experience to offer and they should be directly involved in the regional forums.

“Silencing some voices in this discussion will fuel speculation that the “Conversation on Health” is a foil for expanded privatization, user fees and service cuts,” says Heyman.

The unions say they will continue to press government to reverse their position while encouraging their members to participate in the ‘health conversation’ in other ways.