HEU negotiates one-year moratorium on disciplinary threats in mandatory flu vaccination policy for health care workers

Policy would have enabled employers to fire workers for not being immunized

Tomorrow, a controversial, province-wide Influenza Control Program Policy – Wearing Masks was to be implemented, calling on all health care workers to declare whether or not they had been vaccinated for the seasonal flu, or be forced to wear a mask for the next several months while on duty. Or worse, be terminated.

But after negotiations, HEU has reached an agreement with government to put its policy on hold for 12 months. And there will be no punitive measures against health care workers who aren't immunized.

The Hospital Employees' Union – on behalf of facilities subsector members – had filed a freedom of expression and breach of privacy rights Policy Grievance with the Health Employers Association of BC (HEABC), arguing it's the personal right of all workers to choose whether or not to be immunized, without being forced by government policy.

Some health care workers had refused to be vaccinated on the grounds of religion, negative side effects from previous inoculations, and other personal reasons.

"In past practise, immunization has been voluntary," says HEU secretary-business manager Bonnie Pearson. "Our members already know the importance of precautions – such as safe hand-washing, wearing protective masks and gowns, or staying home from work if sick – during seasonal flu outbreaks. They have the right to make informed decisions that best protect them and their patients without employer threats to penalize them. We will continue to encourage HEU members to get vaccinated and take precautionary measures."

Under the settlement, the health ministry will work with unions over the next year on educational initiatives, continued access to flu vaccine clinics, and to promote a full-scale implementation of this policy. Meanwhile, workers will not be disciplined or fired for failing to get vaccinated.

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