



Give staff the time to care

October 18 is Health Care Assistant Day.

First proclaimed by the provincial government in 2011, it's a time to recognize the exceptional commitment and skill B.C.'s care aides and community health care workers bring to health care's front lines.

You may not know health care assistants by their various job titles, but they are the backbone of personal care and support in our long-term care homes, the community, and increasingly in our acute care hospitals.

They are the people who provide seniors and others with every aspect of personal care – from feeding, toileting, dental care and bathing to comforting those who are confused, afraid, or in the final stages of life.

And they do it in the face of significant obstacles that undermine their own health, and the quality of care they are able to provide.

On October 18 we say it's time. It's time to care. For too long, government has ignored the warning signs that come from not having sufficient staff to provide the level and quality of care British Columbians deserve.

In B.C.'s residential care facilities, for example, it has become typical for care aides to try and meet the needs of their often frail, elderly residents, without being given enough time to do the job.

That means people are literally being run off their feet. And because of that, they are experiencing more injuries, illness, and too frequently, burnout.

Statistics tell a disturbing story. Not only do care aides have the highest injury rates in our hospitals and long-term care settings, they are three times more likely to strain their backs than construction workers.

During a typical day, a care-aide will lift 38 patients into bed, or from a bed to a chair. The cumulative weight of all patients lifted in a day is estimated to be 1.8 tons.

But it's not only the physical toll that affects these front line care workers. There's a tremendous emotional toll as well.

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When people are being pulled in so many different directions, and are not able to be there for someone – who may be lonely, or agitated, or in pain, or near death – a whole other level of stress kicks in.

It doesn't need to be this way.

In 2010, B.C.'s Ombudsperson Kim Carter conducted a landmark investigation into the state of seniors' care. Her two-part report called for enforceable standards for key aspects of resident care – bathing, meal preparation, and recreational services – and higher staffing levels.

If followed, her detailed roadmap for badly-needed improvements to elder care would make a tremendous difference in the health and well-being of B.C.'s seniors.

But sadly, little has changed.

It's time to admit that focussing solely on the bottom line, at the expense of residents, clients, patients – and the people who provide their care – is simply not working.

Scrimping on human resources may save a few dollars in the short term. But in the long term, it's not cost-effective. It's not sustainable. And it's definitely not compassionate.

When you start adding up the costs that come with sick time, injuries and burnout, there are no savings to be found by short-staffing. But there are a lot of unnecessary costs – both human and financial.

As the union representing the vast majority of health care assistants in B.C., the Hospital Employees' Union continues to call for the policy changes needed to ensure staff have the time they need to do their jobs.

Without that basic investment, our seniors will continue to lose out and our care aides and community support workers will continue to burn out.

On Health Care Assistant Day we urge you to send this message to your government: It's time to care. It's time to invest in *people* – the people who need care, and the people who provide it.

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