

THE FREE PRESS UP FRONT

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PHONE 564-0005

Liberal threat concerns nurses

By DOUG BROWN

Free Press staff writer

Prince George health workers are worried that commuting to Vanderhoof or further may become the norm if the Liberal government takes the white-out to the contracts they legislated this past summer.

Birthe Cisceski, local spokesperson for the B.C. Nurses Union, says the union is worried that in seeking "flexibility" from already-legislated contracts, the Liberal government will want to impose a clause that would allow nurses to be shuffled from one hospital to another in the health region depending on staffing requirements.

"They tried to get that in the contract the last time and we didn't allow it," says Ms. Cisceski. In the Northern Interior Health Region, which stretches north from PG to Mackenzie, the distances and times would be too much for nurses. "After a long day's work it's not safe for the nurse and not safe for the patient."

The union is also worried changes to contracts could include removing employment security provisions that require the employer to either find a laid-off nurse a new position or provide a payout. And, says Ms. Cisceski, nurses are worried the 24 per cent over three years salary increase legislated to them with the last contract will be rolled-back.

The loss of those provisions, combined with the fear that the second and third year of nurses' salary increases won't be funded by the government will impact efforts to recruit nurses to B.C., says

Ms. Cisceski. Calls for nurses outside the province interested in coming to B.C. increased after the summer settlement, she adds, but she expects those calls to dry up if the contract's future is in doubt.

"If the government follows through on its threat to gut our contracts, it will roll back the progress that has been made this year to make this province more competitive in the international struggle to keep and attract enough nurses needed by patients," says BCNU president Debra MacPherson.

Prince George Regional Hospital is currently understaffed by about 40 full-time nurses and numerous casual nurses, says Ms. Cisceski.

Members of the Health Sciences Association are also worried about their own contract, legislated into existence at the same time as the nurses.

Local spokesperson for the HSA Fred McLeod says the Liberals' refusal to quell rumors that a legislated contract the HSA was already unhappy with could be re-opened and made even less palatable for the union has made members uneasy.

"We're concerned about the opening-up of any contracts. The idea of a contract is it's a binding agreement for a period of time," he says. The HSA, he adds, has requested a meeting with Health Services Minister Colin Hansen to discuss the possibility of contracts being re-written. "This would completely disregard the sanctity of any contract...But it's important to remember they haven't done anything yet."

Solemn/Solidarity



Martina Velentini lights a candle in remembrance of the 14 women gunned down at L'ecole Polytechnique Montreal in 1989, at a vigil hosted by the Native Friendship Centre Thursday.

JENNIFER PARKS/FREE PRESS

RCMP investigation into fatal snowmobile crash could take months

A snowmobile accident that claimed the life of a Prince George man could also mean charges against the driver.

Forty-two-year-old Dwight George Webster was the passenger on a snowmobile that collided with a rocky portion of the shoreline of Tabor Lake in heavy fog last Sunday. He died at the scene. The driver — who's name has not been

released — was taken to PGRH with undisclosed injuries.

Prince George RCMP are saying that alcohol and lack of a helmet were contributing factors in the death. Police spokesperson Constable Mike Herchuk says under the criminal code the operation of a snowmobile while intoxicated carries just as stiff a penalty as operating an automob-

ile.

"They are just as liable for any charges as if they were behind the wheel of a car or truck," he says.

Helmet-wearing, however, is not required by law for snowmobilers.

Charges, if any, won't be made until a full accident investigation is complete, including a mechanical inspection of the snowmobile, interviews with the driver and any witnesses,

and checks to verify blood alcohol levels at the time.

Cst. Herchuk says a full accident profile will be done as well, just as in an automobile fatality. Altogether it could take anywhere from a month to two months to complete the investigation.

Possible charges could include criminal negligence causing death and dangerous driving, he adds.

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