

On January 18, approximately 500 Health Science Professional Bargaining Association (HSPBA) members called into a Telephone Town Hall meeting to hear Jeanne Meyers (Chief negotiator HSPBA) and David Martin (Health Science Association) report out on efforts being made on behalf of the HSPBA around fighting back against the Health Employers' Association of B.C. (HEABC) plan to roll back pharmacists' wages by up to 14 per cent.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, the government imposed an agreement on Health Science Professionals (HSP). For the first time, the agreement saw differential wage increases for members, based on the government's call on which professions needed market adjustments to meet market demand. Some professions, pharmacists included, got a higher wage increase than other professions.

In 2005 there was discussion with HEABC regarding wage premiums for pharmacists to address problems with recruitment. A Memorandum of Agreement was negotiated that allowed for the introduction of market adjustments outside the regular collective agreement to address competitive labour market pressures. In the case of pharmacists, the pressure was there, and in 2006 we negotiated wage premiums ranging from nine to 14 per cent. These premiums were negotiated outside the regular collective agreement, and were not costed against the agreement. That was possible because the health authorities said they could and would find the money to pay.

Those premiums have been in place since 2006, and while the shortages are not as universally acute as they were in 2006, you all know that staffing is a challenge every day. In smaller communities, you regularly count on hiring retail pharmacists to cover part time and casual shifts.

In larger facilities, the challenge is the same. There are simply not enough people to do the work. HEABC's argument that the shortages are no longer an issue is absolutely absurd. There's no disaster right at the moment, only because the employer is offering wages and benefits that a hospital pharmacy position competitive. Take \$12,000 out of someone's pocket, and we're talking about a completely different reality.

Earlier this month, on January 6, HEABC served notice that it intends to eliminate the market adjustments effective April 1, 2012 in all health authorities, except for Northern Health Authority, which opted out of the wage rollback.

POLICY GRIEVANCE

The HSPBA filed a policy grievance on the matter. In the policy grievance, the union is calling on the HEABC to cease and desist. The union believes HEABC's action contravenes the collective agreement.

Under the terms of the collective agreement, the parties have 14 days to resolve the grievance. A meeting with HEABC was scheduled for January 26. If there is no resolution, then the issue will proceed to arbitration.

WHAT CAN PHARMACISTS DO TO OPPOSE THE ROLLBACK?

Pharmacists reported that the elimination of a competitive salary would land hospitals right back into a severe crisis. Pharmacists have an important role on the health care team, and play a critical role in reducing costs in the health care system.

- Up to 25 per cent of emergency room visits result from medication ‘mishaps.’ Clinical pharmacists can reduce hospital visits and stays by ensuring the proper medication and combinations of medications are prescribed as a patient’s therapy.
- Pharmacists ensure effective and safe treatment of patients: medication counselling, drug therapy monitoring, and diagnosing and resolving drug-related adverse effects are all part of the job. Hospital pharmacists also work to mitigate critical drug shortages and recalls. With the hospitals short-staffed, medication safety becomes a serious issue.
- 17% of hospital pharmacists -- 155 of 905 in BC – are currently eligible for retirement. Arising from that discussion, HSA and the representative group of pharmacists undertook to follow up with a number of actions.

OVERTIME – DON’T DO IT FOR FREE

Stop working free overtime. This includes working through your meal breaks.

How much less could we ask of ourselves than to receive our entitlement for the work we do. In our discussion with pharmacists at last week’s meeting, they told us you are not prepared to stop working overtime at this time.

We are therefore saying that you must put actual fiscal pressure on the employer by insisting you are paid for the overtime you work. It is no secret that outrageous amounts of overtime are being worked every day, day after day, without compensation. Management, you, and we all know that the system depends and is subsidized by the unpaid overtime you put in. You are entitled to be paid for the overtime you put in. Being paid for the work you’re doing will not negatively affect patient care, and it will send a strong signal to the employer that you are serious about your opposition to the wage rollback – about your anger at the strong message from government and HEABC that your contribution is undervalued.

In addition to ensuring you are credited for all your overtime worked, we encourage you to cash out any authorized overtime you have already accumulated to ensure you are paid out your overtime bank at your current rate of pay.

RETIREMENT PACKAGES

Almost 20 per cent of you are in the retirement ‘window.’ To make it perfectly clear to your employer that you are considering your options, you should ask for a retirement package – the paperwork necessary for filing your retirement notice.

This is another administrative tactic that will deliver the message, again, that pharmacists are considering their options as a result of an ill-considered plan by HEABC to cut costs.

If you have any questions or concerns on please contact Labour Relations Officer Rhiannon Bray.

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