

Nursing layoffs a serious setback to patient care and profession's future



The beginning of a new year is an opportunity to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year and to anticipate the advances in nursing we can make this year. I think most members will agree that 2004 was a year of steady progress and continued recovery for registered nurses and the health-care system we uphold.

There were provincial investments in full-time nursing positions in the community and hospital sectors, funding for new graduates, support for graduate nursing studies, and mentorship and preceptorship assistance. There was a significant infusion of federal funds for health care following the fall Health Summit, and a belief that barriers to reform were falling away. The provincial government set out an ambitious agenda to create local health networks, wrestle with wait lists, establish family health teams, overhaul long-term care legislation, and review competitive bidding for home-care services.

But only weeks into the new year, on Jan. 17, that momentum stalled as Health Minister George Smitherman acknowledged that despite his announcement of an additional \$200 million to help Ontario hospitals balance their budgets, "jobs will be lost." He projected a loss of 757 nursing full-time equivalents, adding that he hoped reductions could come from early retirements, attrition and cutting overtime – leading inevitably to cuts in nursing services.

The minister made this decision despite the fact he is trying to retain – not release – senior nurses; despite the fact that Ontario has the second oldest RN workforce and third worst nurse-to-population ratio in Canada; and despite the fact that almost 10,000 Ontario RNs are projected to retire by 2006.

With a wearying sense of *deja vu*, we are

forced to look backward – not forward – as we explain once again how nursing layoffs will hurt patient care, jeopardize RN recruitment and retention, and cost the system more.

As you probably read and heard, RNAO reacted swiftly and strongly to the announcement. What you may not know, however, is how well your colleagues responded, talking to reporters, participating in RNAO's Annual Day at Queen's Park, and writing substantive letters to local MPPs and the health minister.

I thank those members, and share part of a particularly cogent letter from RNAO member Tolleen Parkin:

I am curious to know how you plan to hire and fire nurses simultaneously?

I am curious to know how spending millions of dollars in severance packages, only to hire the same nurses back again, is advantageous to Ontario taxpayers?

I am curious to know how you plan to recruit and retain nurses into the Ontario health-care system (when the average age of a nurse is 45) if you provide no stability?

...I am curious to know how you can reduce overtime when there aren't enough nurses to do the job now, let alone during a layoff? I am curious to know how you can reduce sick time in the current climate of an overworked, understaffed, demoralized workforce? ...

Nurses are vital to any health-care arena and initiative. If you provide the stability, Mr. Smitherman, the benefits in terms of costs and patient outcomes will follow.

If the government were in tune with nurses like Tolleen, it would understand the damage that layoffs – real or rumored – cause. The massive layoffs of the 1990s led to havoc in health care, foolhardy expenditures on expensive severance packages, followed by

high recruitment costs. Not to mention the suffering endured by patients, their families and nurses themselves. We must not repeat those mistakes, or nursing will never recover.

And if the government were in tune with the public, it would know what patients and families already understand – and what evidence shows: the number of RNs has a direct link to patient health. Nurse-patient ratios directly affect, for instance, the rate of patient infections, pneumonia, and length of stay. Without enough nurses,

punishing workloads will continue to burn out staff and compromise patient care. That the public understands these connections is clear from a recent poll conducted by SES Research. Nearly three-quarters of those polled, 72 per cent, said the Ontario government should spend new health-care dollars on hiring nurses.

RNAO supports government plans to reform health care, but we've told the Minister and the Premier they can't do that without enough nurses. We need a strong signal from the government – no later than in the spring budget – that they will bring stability and security to nursing in Ontario. We need more funding for full-time RN positions, resources for late-career RNs, and better conditions for community nursing. Nursing students must be reassured they haven't made the wrong choice. Working RNs need to know they are valued, or they'll leave the province, the country, or the profession.

We look forward to receiving those signals soon so we can focus on rebuilding the profession and improving the health of Ontarians.

JOAN LESMOND, RN, BScN, MSN, IS
PRESIDENT OF RNAO.

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