

System Dangerously Disrupted

The first phase of the government's health care restructuring plan is almost completed and from their point of view, things are going smoothly. They even went as far as to pat themselves on the back, proclaiming that Emergency Department and Urgent Care wait times have improved after just three weeks.

Announcements like these do nothing more than to further illustrate how out of touch the government is on the real issues affecting health care.

Over the past months, more than 2,000 nurses have received deletion notices from several of the major health facilities in Winnipeg.

The government has presented the deletion of thousands of nursing jobs as a simple, seamless project – almost like a game of checkers – move one nurse here, remove a few in the process and ta-da health care is fixed.

There is nothing simple about moving thousands of nurses around the health care system. These deletions have caused mass disruptions in a health system that is already stressed, adding confusion for patients over where to access care and contributing to anxiety for health care staff over job security. Admittedly, deletions are not layoffs and the government has promised that there will be a job in the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) for any nurse that wants one. Unfortunately, this has not been our experience.

There are currently 40 nurses at the Victoria Hospital on lay-off. One thousand nurses from the St. Boniface Hospital will soon begin their job selection process, while 300 at the Health Sciences Centre and 32 at Riverview Health Centre have received deletion notices.

I am skeptical that all the affected nurses will have jobs.

As a union, we are understandably concerned when members face job loss, but we are also nurses and as nurses, safe patient care is always our number priority.

The loss of nursing jobs in a time when patient acuity is higher and the nursing workforce is already stretched thin is cause for concern.

Anecdotally, nurses tell us that the acute-care teaching unit at the Grace Hospital is consistently over capacity, providing care for approximately 34 patients when their capacity is 30.

At the St. Boniface Hospital, the new rotations on the Acute Care Surgical Services has decreased the minimum staffing requirement for safe patient care.

At the Health Sciences Centre, we are told that emergency department visits are up to 240 per day from 190, due to the closure of the Misericordia Urgent Care and the Victoria Hospital ED.

Patients who do not meet the trauma criteria, are being treated at here because there is simply no place else to go.

In public health, sick calls from nurses are not replaced and vacancies are not filled. In many cases, one nurse is covering the caseload of three.

Riverview Health Centre's chronic care unit had their baseline nursing staff cut in half.

Then there is the impact on the nurses. Nurses routinely take on more than they should to ensure that their patients receive the care they need. In times like these, the extra burden placed on nurses can lead to increased occurrences of burnout.

Furthermore, there is no shortage of research that demonstrates significant organizational change can directly impact the psychological health of employees, most notably in high-stress work environments such as the health care sector.

Such large-scale organizational change, specifically those that do not consider the perspectives of employees, also contribute to increased role stress along with physical/psychological demands, causing a significant threat to the psychological health and safety of employees. What is most important, is there is a direct link between the health and safety of nurses and their ability to provide safe, patient care.

We are not averse to change. Nurses have been called on many times in the past to adapt to changing working environments, and undoubtedly, we will be asked to further adapt in the future. In fact, we have on many occasions, brought forward recommendations to government about where improvements can be made.

We have asked government to consult with front line health care workers before implementing these massive changes. To date, this has not happened and now thousands of nurses are faced with uncertainty over jobs, patients are in limbo, services are disrupted and we are all left wondering what was the point of it all.

As the government continues to roll out its plan for health care, we ask again that they consult with nurses and other frontline health care providers.

More than 600 nurses from the St. Boniface Hospital and the Health Sciences Centre have emailed their respective employer in response to the new rotations.

This is a good place to start; listen to the concerns of nurses, take these recommendations into account because we all want the same thing – ensuring that Manitobans have timely access to safe quality health care.

An op-ed by MNU president Sandi Mowat, printed in Winnipeg Free Press, Tuesday, November 7, 2017