



VIHA trims Alberni lab services

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Microbiology lab services at West Coast General Hospital (WCGH) are being downsized, and two positions have been eliminated as partial service moves to Nanaimo.

Management says its streamlining services, but the president of the Hospital Sciences Association (HSA) says savings should be used to deliver local service.

The Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) said the move is a step toward a "hub-and-feeder" system service delivery, and takes effect May 1.

Port Alberni will become a feeder site where samples are collected, and "fed" to the hub, which will be Nanaimo.

"Only five to 10 per cent of the total lab tests we do will be moved to Nanaimo," WCGH site manager Ellen Brown said. "It's a small component."

Gram stain, throat swabs and urine samples will still be collected on site, but microbiology and systology services will be consolidated, Brown said.

Several safeguards will ensure sample delivery and turnaround times, Brown said.

Courier service from WCGH will be increased to twice a day.

Also, the lab at Nanaimo General Hospital where samples are sent operates later into the evening than the lab at WCGH, meaning they can process more.

And sample results will be sent electronically the next day.

An evaluation process will be carried out in six months as well.

"We don't foresee a big impact on patients, but we will carry out an evaluation to determine that," Brown said.

Patients may not be impacted, but lab staff will be.

Two unionized lab positions - one full time and one part time - will be eliminated because of the change.

"We're working with the union to make sure they continue to have a job in the system," Brown said.

"We're not sure how that's going to look yet, but we're working hard not to lose anybody."

B.C. HSA president Reid Johnson confirmed the union is in discussions with VIHA about maintaining its members' employment.

But there are also broader issues, he said.

"The bigger picture is, are local communities who are seeing their service delivery system changed, going to still get the same access to same quality service that they had before," he said.

Moving the service will affect how long it takes for doctors to receive patients' test results.

"About 85 per cent need some kind of diagnostic test like a lab or imaging test in order for doctors to make a decision," Johnson said.

"Doctors in Port Alberni will get sample results quicker if the testing is done in Port Alberni."

The HSA appreciates efficiencies made in the public system.

However, it wants to see savings used to delivering services again locally, he said.

VIHA hasn't indicated what if anything will be done with savings, Johnson said.

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