

BULLETIN

Advocating with pride and professionalism

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nita Bardal never saw herself as an activist. She considered herself more the quiet type, someone who stays out of the spotlight: a helper, rather than a fighter. So she was a bit surprised at herself when she became HSA Chief Steward for St. Pauls Hospital in 2001.

Anita Bardal Chief Steward, OH&S Steward Medical Radiation Technologist St. Paul's Hospital
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-I didnt think I was a political activist ... I like to do things in a quiet way," says Bardal, a medical radiation technologist. -But at the time the chief steward had stepped down."

She was approached to take the position, but at first rejected the idea out of hand. -I didnt have much time. I had my family," she says. -But no one was stepping forward. No one really wanted the job because of the possible publicity with it. People are willing to help, but dont want to stick out. But I considered that if we did not have a chief steward at St. Pauls, wed be lacking in terms of the information we got from HSA.

-I stepped forward because there was a need. I felt I was willing to take that responsibility, and would speak up if there was a need. I decided to put myself at service ... try it for a year," she explains.

This motivation ... to be of service ... and her -quiet way" of doing things have provided the basis for a working style that puts member empowerment front and centre while steadfastly avoiding a confrontational approach toward the employer.

-I try to represent our members, but I try to be balanced in our approach. Im not setting out to make enemies out of our employer. Were not looking to deliberately agitate, but we recognize that people arent always well informed about what their rights are. If a member has a question, we check it. We sit down and talk to them and tell them what their rights and options are, but we dont push them to take action. Ill say try to work out with your department first; if that doesnt work, well talk to you again and if necessary, and Ill advocate for you at meetings."

Bardal says her ideal is when a grievance can be won without leaving the bitter aftertaste that comes after an ugly battle: -The high points of this work are when you see a grievance and youre able to follow it through to the end, and the resolution becomes one thats created by both parties and acceptable to both parties. You look for a win-win situation."

A great deal can be accomplished by knowing and presenting the right information, says Bardal.

-As an example, I worked with the orthoptics department, helping with an issue they needed addressed, and as an aside to that I asked about workplace injuries. They said that due to their equipment they have lots of shoulder and neck injuries," says Bardal. She knew that the ultrasound department dealt with similar injuries, and had begun providing massage for staff on the grounds that the costs of staff injury were higher than the cost of the massage. So she put the orthoptics department in touch with the ultrasound department.

-The members in orthoptics had to show the number of WCB claims, and how much they cost the department, and find out the costs of the massage therapy," says Bardal. -A while later I talked to the orthoptics members and they had gotten this approved."

This example illustrates another hallmark of Bardal's working style: her focus is not on taking care of members, but rather empowering them, whenever possible, to take care of themselves.

-This wasn't a fight that I had to have," she says. -I didn't have to go to the union with it, didn't have to go to human resources and say this is what you have to do. I was able to provide the information members needed so they could find their own solution. You don't always have to have the steward take things on for you. We need members to be committed to what they want to have corrected in the workplace."

Success in this kind of negotiation gives members -a sense the employer is listening to them. It makes them feel more valued," says Bardal.

However, Bardal harbours no illusions that all ... or even most ... workplace concerns are so easily solvable in today's political climate.

-I don't want to blame everything on the Liberal government but under their leadership, there's been constant change at our workplaces. The government wants to be leaner and meaner. They're operating health care like a business, but it's not. It's about caring for patients," she says.

-The employers say it's not personal, but for the people in health care it is personal. They put their heart and soul into it. Yet they're being told not to care so much. That's a hard thing to do in health care," says Bardal. Unmanageable workloads and constant change are two of the biggest stressors in her workplace, she adds.


-There's so much restructuring. It puts a lot of stress on staff ... they don't know where their jobs will be from day to day. It's the same everywhere in health care in BC. The big thing is "What's going to change this week?"

-I have a nine-year-old and a 14-year-old. I like my job and have a passion for what I do, but right now, I'd have to think twice about recommending it to my kids. It's not a matter of the wages ... it's the recognition, the respect, the conditions," she says.

While her frustrations are considerable, and shared by many others in this province, she is careful not to let them overwhelm her.

-I wouldn't say I'm laid-back, but I don't fret about what I can't do," she says. And Bardal takes satisfaction from the gains she *has* been able to achieve.

-One thing I'm proud of is that I was able to work it out with the employer to get negotiated set steward time each week to deal with union issues," she says. Such an arrangement had never existed at St. Paul's. -Another good thing is that we now have an HSA office assigned to us on-site. Now, if people need to, they can come and talk in private. All the stewards have a key, there's a computer set up, a printer, fax machine and voice mail," says Bardal.

These practical advances ... just a few of Bardal's achievements during her three-year tenure (so far) as chief steward ... make HSAs problem-solving approach that much more accessible to members at St. Paul's. Bardal is clearly succeeding at her original goal: to be of service. 

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