



BULLETIN

Your benefits should not be a political football

December 2, 2013

A MESSAGE FROM JEANNE MEYERS, HSA LABOUR RELATIONS AND LEGAL SERVICES

HSA REPORT, DECEMBER 2013

As this issue of The Report goes to press, the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association has reached a tentative agreement for a renewed contract running from April 1, 2014 to March 31, 2019.

The proposed five-year agreement has a number of elements that I and the bargaining committee believe meet the needs of health science professionals.

For more than a decade, wages and benefits have been under attack by the provincial government. Free collective bargaining has not existed in any real measure in the public sector, which has been subject to de facto wage controls. And in more recent bargaining, benefits have been in the government's sights.

Led by the BC Nurses' Union and BCGEU, a change in drug benefits coverage in 2012 saw public sector union members lose coverage with a switch to a Pharmacare tie-in system, eliminating any coverage for drugs not included in the Pharmacare formulary. In this tentative agreement, HSPBA has managed to address this loss by restoring coverage of 50 per cent of the costs paid direct at the pharmacy for drugs that are not recognized by Pharmacare.

To address the increasing pressure on benefits, your bargaining committee worked to find creative solutions and the result is a proposal for a joint trust to run the benefits program. Under the terms of the tentative agreement, benefits are guaranteed to remain as they currently are until at least 2016.

HSPBA will obtain full access to all financial information, as well as claims usage statistics for our members.

When the time arrives in April 2016 to fund the new joint trust, the trustees will have the option of either: taking all HSPBA assets and liabilities from the current trust, Health Benefits Trust, as they exist at that time; or making a clean start with the new trust and starting out with a fresh pot of money.

That decision will be a careful and well informed decision based on a meticulous review of the financial and claims information, and the best interests of the members. The trust will have joint oversight by both the union and the employer and we will have the ability to manage the risk, and control any potential redesign of the benefits plan.

Joint trusts do come with some risk, but we believe this small risk is preferable to the certainty of \$3.8 million cuts each year for the next several years. Joint trusts already manage your pension, and a joint health trust similar to the one in the Tentative Agreement is working very well for unionized support workers at elementary schools. A far greater risk lies in not accepting this opportunity and leaving ourselves vulnerable to the government's whim in the next round of bargaining set to commence the spring of 2014.

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