



Health science members vote on new tentative agreement

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In late November, the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association reached a tentative agreement for the 17,000 health science professionals delivering modern health care in BC's hospitals and communities.

It is a five-year agreement that expires March 31, 2019. The agreement was reached in advance of the expiry of the current agreement, set to run out on March 31, 2014.

"HSA entered into early negotiations after being approached by government, which was looking to find common ground that meets our shared objectives for stability in the health care system, as well as a strong commitment to recruitment and retention of the health science professionals essential to the modern health care team," said Val Avery, president of the Health Sciences Association of BC.

"This tentative agreement does just that. Over the course of five years, our members will achieve modest wage increases, and work with employers to continue to deliver quality care to patients. In addition, employers have committed to processes aimed at recruitment and retention of highly skilled and in-demand health science professionals," she said.

How the early negotiations rolled out

At the end of August, the government started approaching some unions to discuss early negotiations. Many agreed, including HSA. On September 19, HSA convened a special meeting for Chief Stewards, the local leadership around the province.

At that meeting HSA stewards gave your bargaining committee a mandate to proceed with negotiation and to focus on talks around wages, protection for benefits, fixes to the Pharmacare Tie-In drug benefits, more resources for the Enhanced Disability Management Program, solutions for recruitment and retention, and a five-year term for any resulting agreement.

Protection and improvement for your benefits

Members have told us they want a modest wage increase without losing benefits. That's challenging, because the government is determined to reduce wages and cut benefits. They wanted to cut \$3.8 million from your benefits - a deep and painful cut.

Maybe that's why there are rumours about cuts to benefits. But they are not true.

This agreement delivers a modest 5.5% wage increase without cutting benefits. Health care workers have the highest rate of workplace injury, so we negotiated more support for the Enhanced Disability Management Program. Significant improvements have been made to the Pharmacare Tie-In drug coverage imposed in the last contract: it now provides 50% coverage of drugs not covered by Pharmacare, a big savings for members facing health issues. And those savings are retroactive to September 1, 2013. With the Blue Net Card, you will not have to save and submit receipts. The 50% is deducted right at the pharmacy.

The current benefits remain unchanged, and in 2016 a jointly-run trust will be established to give HSA the power to make decisions about future changes to benefits.

The proposed joint trust can protect your benefits from the whims of government

Governments around Canada are looking to reduce the cost of benefits for union members, and BC is no different. The government would have cut \$3.8 million from your benefits – every year, and those cuts would have been spelled out and put in place by an arbitrator in four months.

Your benefits are too important to be used as a political football.

This agreement establishes a jointly-run benefits trust in 2016. Under this plan, your benefits would be managed like your pension – by a specialized and balanced group that meets the needs of both sides. The agenda will no longer be set by the short-term needs of government negotiators.

It will allow for shared administration and decision making about participation in and management of your benefits. We get access to all the data we need to help us make decisions based on how our members use the benefits available to them. Benefits are guaranteed to remain unchanged until at least 2016, and HSPBA members will have the opportunity to provide input to the joint trust. That means you'll get a say about which benefits are most important to you and how the plan might be improved to meet your family's needs.

Joint trusts come with some risk, but risk is preferable to the certainty of \$3.8 million cuts each year for the next several years. Furthermore, without any control over administration of benefits we will not be able to avoid ongoing demands for cuts. Joint trusts already manage your pension, and a joint trust is working for unionized support workers at elementary schools.

In short, rejecting this deal will put the fate of your benefits back into the hands of a government looking to score quick wins at your expense.

That means an immediate cut of \$3.8 million from benefits, leaving members with reduced coverage and increase co-payment obligations. And government will be able to impose further cuts as they please. This deal protects us from that and gives members a say in how to protect and improve their benefits.

A modest wage increase

Unions bargaining in the health care sector are facing a government demanding reduced wages and benefits. In the last two rounds, the government first froze wages, then forced unions to fund them by reducing benefits.

In spite of these challenges, our bargaining teams have managed to negotiate wages on par with the cost of living. Since 2001, the minimum total wage increase for health science professionals has totaled 24.65% -- while the cost of living in BC has gone up 20.57%. And that is the minimum. Some of our members have seen wage increases totaling 48.85%

Members have told us they want a modest wage increase without giving up benefits, and that's what this agreement achieves. Members will receive a 5.5% increase over five years, and if another health care union or the public service achieves a better increase, this agreement guarantees we get that increase too.

Improvements to the Pharmacare Tie-In drug benefits program

Government is trying to dramatically reduce the cost of wages and benefits for every union in BC. That's why the Pharmacare Tie-In was imposed in the last contract. HSA fought against it, but after BCNU and BCGEU accepted it we had to as well. We can't get rid of the Pharmacare Tie-In, but with this agreement, we've improved it significantly for our members.

The Pharmacare Tie-In used to provide no coverage at all for the large number of drugs not included on Pharmacare's coverage list. Now, if Pharmacare doesn't cover it, your benefits will pay 50% directly at the pharmacy with your Blue Net Card. That's a big savings for members facing health challenges. And those savings are retroactive to September 1, 2013.

Economic Stability Dividend gives you a share of economic growth

Under this proposed agreement, HSA members will get a share of BC's economic growth from 2016-2019.

That means if the economy outperforms projections during those four years, HSA members will see their wages increased over and above the negotiated increases.

This contract avoids deep cuts to your benefits

Governments in BC and around Canada are demanding cuts to wages and benefits for union members. Here in BC, the government wanted to cut \$3.8 million from your benefits every year.

If we had not successfully steered clear of those cuts, we could have seen benefits losses like caps on services and reductions in benefits.

But we didn't accept that. We fought back.

Instead, HSA negotiators managed to protect your benefits and get you a modest wage increase.

The current benefits remain unchanged, and we have negotiated a jointly-run trust starting in 2016 so that HSA will have a say in decisions about the future design of our benefits plan.

A path forward on recruitment and retention

Any health science professional will tell you that shortages are reaching a crisis level. And with the government insisting on cutting wages and benefit costs for unions in BC, that's going to be hard to fix.

This agreement manages to deliver a modest pay increase of 5.5% without cutting benefits. And while there is no room to negotiate more significant wage increases, this agreement establishes a joint recruitment and retention committee designed to address issues driving shortages of health science professionals. It will identify barriers to recruitment and retention, and can make the case for labour market adjustments where other tools simply won't work.

Other unions have other priorities

Other unions are attacking the HSA's tentative agreement. Some of their members are represented by the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association, which is led by HSA.

These other unions mostly represent members who are NOT health science professionals. That means they have different bargaining priorities. In the last rounds, these other unions were quick to negotiate contracts that sacrificed benefits, and HSA was forced to follow this precedent.

This time, HSA is taking a stand for your benefits. So while the other unions attack and even spread misinformation, remember: they don't represent you and they don't represent your priorities.

This agreement protects your benefits and delivers a modest 5.5% increase over five years. And if another health care union or the public service achieves a better increase, this agreement guarantees we get that increase too.

Every member gets a vote through the mail-in ballot

This is an important contract, and as always every member will have an opportunity to cast their vote. In the past we've heard concerns that voting at meetings can be hard because of scheduling and weather, so this time we are members will vote by mail-in ballot.

To make sure all members can make an informed decision, an information and voting package has been mailed

to all HSA members covered by the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association. The package includes ballots and instructions for voting by mail. Members will receive their packages in the first week of December.

All votes must be received by HSA by December 19. To guarantee your vote will arrive on time, we suggest mailing your ballot by December 11.

Ballots can be dropped off at HSA's office until 5:00 pm on December 19. We also have a ballot box available if members would prefer to vote here.

Summary of highlights

- Wage increase totalling 5.5 per cent over five years; with a possibility for improvements dependent on the performance of BC's economy (Economic Stability Dividend)
 - A "me-too" clause. If other comparable public sector compensation increases exceed these increases, then the HSPBA collective agreement will be adjusted by an across-the-board percentage increase to match those compensation increases.
- Protection of benefits
 - Current benefits provided by the collective agreement will be maintained until April 1, 2016
 - A jointly-run trust will be established by April 1, 2016 to allow for joint administration and decision-making about participation in and management of benefits
 - The Pharmacare Tie-In drug benefits coverage program, introduced in the 2012-2014 contract, will be improved to allow for 50% coverage for prescriptions not covered by the Pharmacare formulary. The change is retroactive to Sept. 1, 2013.
- Improved commitment to disability management for staff, ensuring they are supported to return to work successfully after absence due to injury or illness - health care workers experience the highest rate of occupational injury in BC.
 - Increase Enhanced Disability Management Program union representatives.
- A joint recruitment and retention committee designed to address issues and initiatives to ensure long-term supply of highly skilled health science professionals.
 - Identify barriers to retention and recruitment
 - Joint union/management requests may be made to government for labour market adjustments to address wage-driven recruitment and retention issues

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