

Invest in health science professionals to save health care in BC

Shortages of skilled workers have brought our health care system to the brink.

We all know the importance of finding more doctors and nurses – but we don't hear as much about the increasing shortage of specialized health professionals doing the diagnosis, testing, treatment and rehabilitation.

The BC government must continue and expand efforts to train, recruit and retain health professionals in over 70 specialized disciplines -- lab technologists, MRI and X-ray technologists, respiratory therapists, physiotherapists, radiation therapists, social workers, dietitians and many more.

Shortages are widespread, create delays for patients, and increase workload and burnout for specialized health professionals

- Cancer patients in BC are now being sent to US hospitals because of the shortage of specialized cancer care professionals including radiation therapists, nuclear medicine technologists, MRI technologists, radiological technologists and laboratory technologists.
- For example, many cancer care patients in BC need a PET scan before they can get treatment or surgery. But there are now only 31 PET technologists in all of BC. And soon there will be fewer due to retirements and opportunities to make more money in other positions.
- BC has the fewest medical radiation technologists (or radiological technologists) per capita in Canada. Ontario has more than double the number per capita.
- BC has the fewest medical laboratory technologists per capita in Canada.
- BC has the highest number of physiotherapists per capita in Canada – but the lowest per capita working in the public health care system.
- A 2022 survey of HSA members revealed concerning indicators of the impact of shortages:
 - 85% are worried about patient care due to workload.
 - 48% said they are considering leaving public practice due to unmanageable workload.

We need more investment in incentives for recruitment and retention

Recently-negotiated pay increases are a big help, but we also need to:

- Expand existing incentive programs to include health science professionals
- Offer tuition bursaries and paid practicums for shortage health science professions with a return-of-service commitment to public-sector employment
- Create incentives to encourage health science professionals in the private sector to return to the public system
- Offer travel and relocation expense reimbursements (as many vacancies are in rural and remote communities); and housing stipends.

Recommendations

- Expand existing incentives to bring health science professionals to communities with chronic unfilled vacancies.
- Develop recruitment and retention incentives targeting health science professionals who have left for the private sector or recently retired, and expand initiatives to recognize international credentials
- Offer an “earn and learn” program that would pay workers already in the health care system to upgrade skills and training for positions in professions facing shortages: lab technologists, pharmacists, anesthesia assistants, occupational therapists, social workers, physiotherapists and speech-language pathologists
- Offer tuition bursaries and paid practicums for shortage health science professions such as medical laboratory technologists, medical radiation technologists (e.g., X-ray, CT), MRI technologists, nuclear medicine technologists (including PET), radiation therapists, radiation therapy service technologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists.
- Establish a new grad transition program – similar to what is currently done for nurses – that include funded mentorship positions and new clinical leadership opportunities to assist in the mentoring and development of the new grads in health science professions.