

We must act to retain BC's specialized health professionals – or we will lose them

BC is suffering from an unprecedented shortage of the skilled professionals needed to deliver health care.

While everyone knows about the shortage of doctors and nurses, we need to pay more attention to the shortage of the specialized health professionals who work alongside them.

There are over 70 different professions within the health sciences, and while there are only a few thousand or even just a few dozen of each working in BC, their role in the system is enormous:

- There are just over 2000 medical laboratory technologists in BC hospitals, and every single diagnosis test depends on them.
- There are just under 2000 medical radiation technologists, and every MRI, CT, X-ray and mammography procedure depends on them. Of these, some 400 radiation therapists work with every patient needing cancer treatment in BC. And every single cancer patient must also have a PET scan delivered by just 30 specialists in the province.
- There are just 80 perfusionists working in BC and the shortage of these specialized staff is so significant that there have been more than 100 cardiac surgery cancellations at St. Paul's Hospital alone between January-June of 2024.
- There are about 1500 hospital physiotherapists in BC, and every patient must be assessed by them before they can be discharged from costly acute care beds and sent home.
- Health science professionals also include pharmacists, registered psychiatric nurses, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, respiratory therapists, speech pathologists, dietitians and many more.

Unfortunately, these frontline professionals are burning out – especially those in supervisory positions. After years of managing crushing workload arising from unfilled vacancies, **one of every three health science professionals currently report they plan to quit in the next two years.**

As the union representing over 22,000 specialized health professionals delivering health care and community social services across BC, HSA recommends urgent action to hang on to the professionals working on the front lines, and recruit new professionals.

Retain health professionals already on the front lines by:

- Expanding initial efforts to develop 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.
- Expanding initial efforts to develop 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.
- Expanding the current recruitment and retention incentives targeting health science professionals who have left for the private sector or recently retired.
- Offering substantial long service retention incentive structures for existing health science professionals.
- Developing appropriate workload ratios alongside those developed for the nurses of BC to allow for a more integrated approach for supporting the whole health care team.

Recruit new health professionals by:

- Expanding temporary incentive programs to recruit health science professionals into the communities with chronic unfilled vacancies.
- Expanding tuition bursaries and paid practicums for health science professions in shortage 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.
- Offering significant relief for student loans in any of the shortage professions.