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COVID-19: Surgeries, tests postponed as 4,000 unvaccinated B.C. health-care workers put on leave

Health Minister Adrian Dix hopes most will still get vaccinated so they can return to work

Lisa Cordasco

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Health Minister Adrian Dix and the provincial health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry. PHOTO BY FELIPE FITTIPALDI /Government of B.C.

Surgeries are being postponed and access to diagnostic tests at B.C. hospitals and clinics is being reduced because of the loss of health-care workers who have not been vaccinated.

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More than 4,000 health-care workers in the province who have not received at least one dose of vaccine were placed on unpaid leave on Tuesday. They have until Nov. 15 to get their first dose or they will be fired. In the meantime, the minister of health said health authorities have been working on plans to fill those vacancies.



Adrian Dix said largely urban health authorities such as Fraser and Vancouver Coastal are more able to fill vacancies because they have a larger pool of casual staff to draw on. Rural regions with lower vaccination rates, like Interior and Northern Health, face greater challenges.

There are about 126,000 public-sector health-care workers in B.C.

“Let’s say something such as renal (kidney) care, where you have a limited number of employees and one or two of them are not able to work in that circumstance, it’s really challenging,” he said. “I think

it's fair to say that in some areas, for example diagnostic imaging, our labs in different parts of the province, there'll be some impact. We'll either have to initially reduce hours in order to address that or provide other staff in the weeks to come."

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Some kidney patients in Grand Forks are being sent more than 100 kilometres away to Trail for dialysis.

The provincial health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, said some staff of larger health authorities may be sent temporarily to fill positions in places like Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops.

"We'll be looking at other parts of the system to supplement areas in the Interior where there's a shortage of people on a temporary basis."

Dix is hoping those put on unpaid leave will become vaccinated soon. He said close to 1,500 health-care workers got their first dose of vaccine in the week leading up to Tuesday's deadline.

"We're hopeful, certainly, that some people, and we've been seeing this in the last number of days, will get immunized, and we're hopeful that they do that and address the problem that way."

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A spokesman for the Hospital Employees' Union that represents lab assistants, pharmacy technicians, administrators, housekeepers, food services, janitors and orderlies said 97 per cent of those workers are vaccinated.

Mike Old said the union is encouraging the remainder to get over their vaccine hesitancy by seeking information through the B.C. Centre for Disease Control and talking to their family doctors.

"We understand the gravity that is facing our health-care system. It is a workplace health and safety issue as well," he said. "There are very difficult conversations taking place among health-care workers right now."

The president of the Health Sciences Association that represents 22,000 physiotherapists, counsellors and medical technicians in B.C. said the group supports the vaccine mandate. However, Kane Tse is worried about the effect of having fewer workers in the system.

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"We have long been concerned about increasing workload and strain for health-care employees, and this situation has become unsustainable due to the pandemic," said Tse. "We are urging the government to move quickly and decisively to support the people who care for us with action to address increasing shortages and severe burnout."

Close to 1,800 workers in long-term care and assisted-living facilities who are unvaccinated lost their jobs on Tuesday. Old said some of those positions will be filled thanks to stepped-up training, which was announced by the province last fall.

“It takes a year to a year and a half to get people through that program, so it will be helpful in the medium term, but in the short term, we are facing a crunch.”

He said many care homes have opted to keep employees on unpaid leave in the hope they will become fully vaccinated.



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