

Angry New Brunswick physicians continue to take job action

New Brunswick's MDs were a distinctly unhappy lot in December. As Christmas approached, doctors in 13 communities staged rotating office closures to protest what they consider unhealthy working conditions. On Dec. 14, more than 100 of them took to the streets of Moncton to protest poor pay and MD shortages. "We want the province to create an environment that is supportive of recruitment," said Dr. John McCann, president of the New Brunswick Medical Society. In particular, physicians are asking for a more competitive fee schedule. They argue that their counterparts in neighbouring Nova Scotia earn as much as 30% more than they do. "In New Brunswick we have reason to be frustrated," said McCann, "and we are concerned about what will happen if the situation is not corrected."

Although the medical society and the government were at the negotiating table throughout much of the fall, by December over 10 months had passed since their contract expired, and a new contract was still

nowhere in sight. The rotating closures — the society calls them "planning days" — were intended to bring public pressure to bear on the government by causing patients to complain. Patients were denied access to appointments and elective surgery during the planning days. "We recognize that some patients will be inconvenienced but we trust that they will understand the problem," says McCann. "If we can't recruit and retain physicians, there are going to be a lot of people in this province who don't have access to appropriate health care."

McCann estimates that New Brunswick currently needs at least 60 additional physicians, but recruiting them is proving difficult because of the fee disparity with other provinces.

The rotating closures are the latest in a series of planned protests that the province's physicians started launching last summer. Any decisions about future protests will depend on the government's response to the latest initiative, says McCann. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

Quebec may tighten medicare eligibility

Almost no one knows about it, but there may soon be tighter regulations governing eligibility for health insurance in Quebec. Under the new rules, all people settling in the province, returning after an absence of 6 months or more or visiting temporarily will have to pay their own medical expenses. Mimi Pontbriand, director of insured services at Régie d'assurance maladie du Québec, says the province's insurance plan is becoming more restrictive in order to "harmonize the system with other provinces and ensure better management of the program." Ontario, British Columbia and New Brunswick have already adopted similar exclusionary rules.

According to the draft legislation, temporary workers will need a permit stating that they will be working in the province for more than 6 months in order to qualify for health benefits; their spouses must also meet the same criteria. Before, they qualified automatically. Immigrants or people returning to the province after an extended absence — even if they were elsewhere in Canada — will have to wait 3 months before receiving coverage. A 3-month wait for Quebecers who are absent from the province for more than 6 months would have an immediate impact on professors on sabbatical leave and medical residents seeking training outside the province, as well as their spouses.

Refugees, people receiving social assistance and senior citizens such as those who spend several months each year in the southern US will not be affected by any of these changes. Health Minister Pauline Marois says the government will decide whether to adopt the legislation after consulting with key groups. — *Susan Pinker, Montreal*

Mass immunizations old hat for Edmonton's MDs

When Edmonton had meningitis outbreaks last year, this little girl was one of more than 170 000 people vaccinated by personnel from the Capital Health District. During the first outbreak, says Medical Officer of Health Gerry Predy, "the decision to mass immunize was made on a Friday, the campaign was organized over the weekend, announced to the public on Monday and the first vaccine was delivered Tuesday." During the campaign, which may be the largest ever attempted in Canada, Predy says his health district "climbed a learning curve that started straight up and stayed there." Lessons learned about the logistical, communication and organizational strategies needed during a mass vaccination are now available in a manual from the health district's public health branch. More information is available from mlock@cha.ab.ca.



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