

Alberta eye surgery patients in limbo

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Alberta Health Services is under fire for leaving thousands of eye surgery patients in limbo after a switch in which clinics can provide those services.

Last week, the province announced a consolidation of eye operations at four centres — two in Calgary and two in Edmonton — as a way to save \$1.4 million annually and cut year-long waiting times.

“The government is claiming that we’re going to see an increase in surgeries. Actually what we’re going to see for the next number of months is a decrease in surgeries and a decrease in the number of surgeons performing them,” said Wil-drose Alliance Leader Danielle Smith.

The new arrangement, which began on Thursday, is supposed to allow the system, which handles 35,000 ophthalmological surgeries a year, to add 2,140 more procedures, including cataract operations and corneal transplants.

Facilities that were previously providing the operations were given only three days’ notice that the province was switching to new providers.

Patients who had a scheduled surgery date will now have to rebook at the new centres, although Alberta Health Services assures them their wait times will not start over.

“For some, the transition to a new booking date may mean a wait time of up to 90 days for surgery,” said the agency in a news release last week. Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky has said no operations will be cancelled.

- In Calgary, 11,700 ophthalmological surgeries are performed annually and 1,500 will be added this year.

- In Edmonton, 15,800 ophthalmological surgeries are currently performed and 640 will be added this year.

Source: Alberta Health Services

Terrible transitional planning

Dr. Thad Demong, head of the Rocky Mountain Surgery Centre in Calgary, said he had to lay off 12 nurses and tell hundreds of patients to rebook at the new facilities chosen by the province.

In Calgary, Mitchell Eye Centre and Surgical Centres Inc. — which currently have four operating rooms between them — won the bids.

Smith said the province should have allowed current facilities to continue doing operations until the new contractors were ready.

“[Alberta Health Services] did terrible transition planning. They’ve closed down, essentially mothballing operating facilities that can do cataract surgeries and corneal transplants before the new facilities are ready to go,” said Smith.

“One of the new facilities isn’t going to be ready till the end of April, another isn’t going to be ready until the end of May. So in the meantime we actually have fewer surgeries being performed over the next couple of months.”

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