

Tories' cataract cost-cutting upsets doctors, patients

BY JASON FEKETE, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 22, 2010



There's growing fallout from the Stelmach government's cost-saving consolidation of cataract surgeries, as some doctors plan to stop performing the procedures, others warn about safety concerns and patients look to reschedule appointments.

The Tory government and Alberta Health Services announced in late March they will concentrate eye operations into four facilities provincewide -- two in Calgary and two in Edmonton -- in an effort to save \$1.4 million annually and chop waiting lists that extend beyond a year.

The cash saved will be reinvested into funding about 2,100 additional cataract surgeries this year for Albertans, the medical superboard maintains. However, the consolidation of services -- which took effect April 1 -- has infuriated many ophthalmologists across the province.

Some doctors are now saying they will no longer conduct the surgeries at a different office with unfamiliar equipment, while facility operators also insist patient safety is being sacrificed in an effort to trim costs.

"You're playing Russian roulette. You're asking people to cut corners," said Heather Climenhaga, president of Alberta Eye Institute, an Edmonton clinic that performs cataract surgeries. "My concern for patients is you get what you pay for."

Climenhaga's clinic was unsuccessful in its bid to be one of the two Edmonton eye surgery facilities chosen by the government.

She said her facility was rejected partly because it refused to cut costs on procedures by reusing a surgical device multiple times -- something allowed in cataract surgeries but not followed by some ophthalmologists and hospitals.

Climenhaga, whose husband Harold is an ophthalmologist, saw her practice reimbursed \$530 per cataract surgery under the old system. But successful Edmonton facilities are now being paid only \$450 per case, she says, which can mean a reduced quality of care and higher risk of infection if surgical devices are reused.

In Calgary, veteran ophthalmologist Dr. Thad Demong said he'll no longer perform public cataract surgeries or corneal transplants after the pro-

vincial government's decision to consolidate the procedures.

The decision means Demong's patients must now find a new doctor and either have their appointments rescheduled or be thrown back into the queue.

He's wondering how the province will fulfil its promise to conduct more surgeries when the number of operating rooms in the city has been reduced to four -- less than half of what was available under the old system.

"I don't want to be jerked around," Demong said. "I moved out of a hospital for this exact reason -- you had to fight for operating rooms. It's just not worth my effort."

Alberta Health Services said it hasn't yet officially been informed of any Calgary doctors who are halting public cataract surgeries.

Eye surgeons from across the province are scheduled to meet with Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky Saturday in Red Deer to voice their concerns about the changes.

Zwozdesky said there was excess operating room capacity under the old system, so consolidating surgeries at a handful of facilities shouldn't impact the number performed. The province is set to announce a second "blitz" of surgeries to help chop long waiting lists for a variety of operations, including cataract procedures, he noted.

"We're adding yet additional surgeries very soon," Zwozdesky said, stressing quality of care won't be sacrificed under the new service agreement.

Albertans in the queue aren't impressed, though.

Doug Young, one of Demong's former patients, had surgery on one eye on March 31 and was scheduled to have his other done next Wednesday. That appointment has since been scrapped under the new system and he's waiting to be re-booked with another doctor.

The ailment causes his eyes to focus at different distances, making it far more difficult to complete daily routines. The 71-year-old accountant is now struggling at the height of tax season to

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complete income tax returns. "I can't read worth a hoot," Young said Wednesday. "I would have rather just stayed with my own doctor. I just can't see how this is going to speed things up."

Calgarian Joanne O'Connell is anxiously waiting for cataract surgery on her right eye so she can properly read and once again drive at night. But her sense of urgency to have the procedure is also mixed with a sense of anxiety about whether she'll receive the same quality of care, as the province looks to save cash.

"I would like to be assured there are no quality problems," O'Connell said. "When you're saving \$1.4 million, you say, 'My gosh, where?' "

The new agreement with ophthalmology service providers is designed to add 2,140 more cataract surgeries in Alberta this year, including 1,500 additional procedures in Calgary, taking the total number in the city to around 10,000 a year.

The two Calgary centres having services consolidated within their operations -- Mitchell Eye Centre and Surgical Centres Inc. -- will have the other ophthalmologists bring their patients over and perform the procedures at their facilities.

Jean Gibson, wife and office administrator for Calgary eye surgeon Dr. Peter Gibson, said they're considering pulling the plug on performing cataract procedures, but will wait until this weekend's meeting with the minister before deciding what to do.

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