

## Eye plan lambasted

BY JENNA MCMURRAY, CALGARY SUN APRIL 1, 2010



With only two facilities contracted to perform cataract surgeries in Calgary, the leader of the Wildrose Alliance said a transition plan is needed as numerous procedures are rescheduled.

Last week, the province announced two of five non-hospital ophthalmological centres that bid to perform the surgeries in Calgary would be granted contracts to do so.

Danielle Smith said the province should have created a transition plan while new operating rooms at the contracted sites get ready to open to accommodate for extra volume.

She said the province should have allowed the other three centres to remain open at least until any new operating rooms become available.

Surgical Centres Inc. was given a contract to perform about 70% of cataract and non-cataract eye procedures, said the facility's senior operating officer Fatima Fazal.

Surgical Centres Inc. currently has five operating rooms and will be opening another five by mid-April.

Mitchell Eye Centre is the other facility contracted to perform cataract surgeries.

But for the three remaining centres, which were forced to cease cataract operations as of Thursday, the move is harsh.

Dr. Thaddeus Demong, who has owned Rocky Mountain Surgery Centre (formerly Chinook Surgery Centre) for nearly two decades and has had a contract to perform cataract surgeries since 1996, said he's had to lay off 10 staffers and tell hundreds of patients waiting for surgeries this year to book elsewhere.

Demong said he is still permitted to perform other eye surgeries, but would have to do any cataract procedures at one of the centres awarded contracts, which he's decided against.

"The contract was awarded on the cheapest price," he said.

"You can't put a value on sight and I don't want to be involved anywhere where I can't do my best."

Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky said though cost played a role in determining which facilities would be awarded contracts, he said safety and quality were also considered in the decision.

The move will save approximately \$1.4 million, allowing surgeons to perform approximately 2,140 additional cataracts procedures per year, said Zwozdesky.

He said the contracted facilities will be able to handle the volume and said surgeries will only be rescheduled, not cancelled.

Ron Milton, a 73-year-old Turner Valley resident, has been waiting for cataract surgery for more than a year and was scheduled to have the operation Thursday.

But it was cancelled due to the fact his surgeon's centre wasn't awarded a contract, he said.

What's most frustrating, he added, is the fact there is equipment at non-contracted facilities gathering dust.

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