

Eye surgeons wary of new cataract policy

Operating beds idle

CALGARY HERALD APRIL 25, 2010



Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky met with eye surgeons from around the province Saturday to defend the government's new cost-saving consolidation of cataract surgeries, even as some Calgary operating beds earmarked for the sought-after procedure sit idle and pushback to the policy grows among doctors left out of the contract.

In a 2½-hour closed-door meeting, Zwozdesky fielded questions from Alberta ophthalmologists to try to clear any confusion around the policy, which saw the Edmonton-based Alberta Health Services superboard concentrate the eye surgeries in four major centres -- two in Calgary.

Some surgeons dismissed the meeting as a public-relations exercise to assuage concerned ophthalmologists long after the critical decisions had already been made.

The Stelmach government rolled out the changes April 1 to chop waiting lists and save \$1.4 million annually that will be reinvested into the system. The move was swiftly criticized over safety concerns and for not giving ophthalmologists enough time to adjust, leaving potentially thousands of procedures delayed during the transition.

On Saturday, a Calgary surgeon whose clinic was awarded roughly 70 per cent of the city's procedures in the new contract said access to the surgery isn't the problem, noting that he's had 17 operating tables unused so far this month under the new system.

Dr. Mohamed Nanji, CEO of Surgical Centres Inc, said his clinic has the capacity to handle the procedures, but noted a handful of the 19 surgeons allocated to bring their patients and perform the procedures at his centre have opted not to embrace the new system.

"Access is there, it's just they haven't moved fast enough to occupy the space," Nanji said after Saturday's meeting. His current clinic has three operating rooms, and a new facility set to open mid-May will have five new rooms.

Alberta has come under fire recently as a laggard compared to the rest of Canada in providing a number of surgeries, including cataract. The issue is particularly striking in Calgary, where the public health system doesn't perform the operations, rather contracting the procedure to private clinics.

Zwozdesky said a second surgery blitz to be announced soon could see as many as 1,000 additional cataract procedures.

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal

Corporate

3125 Bowwood Drive NW
Calgary, AB T3B 2E7

tel. 403.288.9400
fax. 403.288.9405

Riverview

3125 Bowwood Drive NW
Calgary, AB T3B 2E7

tel. 403.288.9400
fax. 403.288.9405

Rockyview

120 - 1016 68 Avenue SW
Calgary, AB T2V 4R6

tel. 403.252.0220
fax. 403.255.7912

New Westminster

104 - 250 Keary Street
New Westminster, BC V3L 5E7

tel. 604.517.1063
fax. 604.517.4652

Seafield

6N - 1179 Seafield Crescent
Nanaimo, BC V9S 4S1

tel. 250.741.0200
fax. 250.741.0225