

MD cites list of ER deaths

Officials given 88 cases from RUH emergency: Witt

Lana Haight

The StarPhoenix

Saturday, April 03, 2004

The Saskatoon Health Region has names of people who died after they were admitted to Royal University Hospital's emergency department, according to the former head of emergency medicine at the hospital.

The health region's chief of medical staff, Dr. Ronan Conlon, was given the medical charts of 88 patients who died within 48 hours of receiving care at Royal University Hospital (RUH) emergency, says Dr. Jon Witt, who was fired as medical director of RUH emergency last month but continues to work as an ER doctor.

"Dr. Conlon chose to ignore the list of 88 names we gave him, 88 patients who were admitted to RUH emergency and subsequently died within 48 hours. Every one of the patients, not one of them was seen within national guidelines," Witt told about 50 doctors, nurses, clerks and other support staff attending a rally to show support for Witt and to call on the government to protect whistle-blowers. The event took place at the Memorial Gates at the entrance to RUH.

He added many of the patients may have died even if they had been seen by a doctor within those time frames but nobody knows that for sure because the patient charts have not been audited.

Witt was removed from his administrative duties after he made claims of unsafe patient care in a letter to the provincial minister of health in January. Conlon, who has called the bluntly worded, two-page letter "inflammatory," also has said his review of patient care at the emergency department did not substantiate Witt's statements.

Conlon has denied Witt's demotion was punishment for raising patient concerns with the provincial government but he has maintained Witt didn't have the necessary administrative skills.

In an interview after the rally, Witt said the patients' names weren't on any list he kept. However, in February when he asked the health region's information system to locate the medical records of all patients in the past 24 months who were not seen by an emergency physician within national guidelines and who died within 48 hours of being admitted to emergency, 88 files were retrieved.

At the rally, Witt pointed to more evidence that he says Conlon ignored: 70 nursing work situation reports that identified unsafe working conditions filed in the past year; the 169 times during the year when ambulances were diverted to other hospitals in Saskatoon because RUH could not offer safe patient care; health region statistics that show heart attack and stroke patients wait too long for a doctor's care; and, children who wait hours before being seen by a doctor.

Emergency overcrowding is not unique to Saskatoon but that's no excuse for ignoring the problem, he said, encouraging the crowd to report every case of unsafe patient care and to



**(Dr. Jon)
Witt**

continue the fight for uncompromised care.

"This is one of the best fights because it's about your health-care system. This is about medicare and free speech and the ability to speak up when there's something wrong going on," said Witt. "I'm very concerned, very concerned when the corporate health-care agenda is to silence critics, to try and muzzle concerns about safe patient care."

Afterward, Witt told reporters that he has no plan to leave Saskatoon because this is his home and it's a home worth fighting for.

"I don't go to work every day for Jim Fergusson (Saskatoon Health Region CEO) or for Dr. Conlon. I go to work each day for the patients, for the people coming through the doors, for the nurses, doctors and support staff I work with."

One of those to speak at the rally in Witt's defence was a retired Saskatoon surgeon, Dr. George Konok, who expressed concern with the quality of emergency care provided at all of Saskatoon's hospitals. He said many of the doctors don't have specialized training and certification in emergency medicine and their response times fall below national standards because they are overworked.

Konok is distressed that Witt was demoted for what he believes was the emergency room doctor's attempt at improving the system by raising the issue of compromised patient care.

Several speakers called on government to pass laws that would protect workers who, in good faith, speak out about unsafe conditions or wrongdoing in the workplace. The federal government introduced such a bill two weeks ago and the Saskatchewan Party plans to introduce a similar private member's bill provincially.

"If people are going to be punished for speaking out against unsafe conditions it will prevent people from speaking out," said Saskatchewan Union of Nurses president Rosalee Longmoore. "We all need our jobs."

Emergency room nurse Tracey McCaig-Beattie spoke out at the rally about her frustration with the health region's handling of the crisis in the department. She is one of four nurses and doctors who met with representatives from administration last week to press for Witt's reinstatement as medical director. After a two-hour meeting, the two sides agreed to meet by the end of this week and to not raise the issues with the media and the public. The end of the week came and went and there was no meeting.

"We looked forward to the meeting. We had high hopes our concerns had not fallen on deaf ears," she told the crowd.

McCaig-Beattie said the delegation suggested their second meeting be held on March 31 but that was turned down by administration and April 2 was chosen instead only to be cancelled by administration. She said on March 30, the region asked to move the meeting to the 31st but not everyone from the emergency room delegation could make the meeting on a day's notice.

In an interview after the rally, McCaig-Beattie defended her decision to speak at the rally.

"They made commitments to us that they would meet by the end of this week. They backed out on those commitments. Based on that, why should I keep up my moratorium of not speaking to the press and not keeping it in the public eye when patient safety is No. 1?"

Saskatoon Health Region had no comment to make regarding the rally. Region spokesperson Lorna Bratvold referred to the agreement the two sides had to refrain from publicly discussing Witt's demotion while the two sides were in talks. Late Friday afternoon, she confirmed a meeting between the groups was now set for Monday.

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2004 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest Global Communications Corp. All rights reserved.
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

