

ER doctor fired over remarks

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Saskatoon — A decision to demote the head of emergency medicine at one of Saskatchewan's largest hospitals saw doctors, nurses and the public rally to his defence Wednesday.

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The Saskatoon Health Region removed Dr. Jon Witt from his position at Saskatoon's Royal University Hospital Tuesday, although he can continue as an emergency doctor.

Dr. Witt wrote a letter Jan. 20 to Health Minister John Nilson on behalf of his staff. It said emergency room resources were spread too thinly and patient care was suffering.

Mr. Nilson said neither he nor the government had anything to do with the decision.

Dr. Ronan Conlon, the health region's chief of medical staff, said the decision to remove Dr. Witt from his post was "not punitive." He told the hospital's medical staff a review of patient files found no validity to Dr. Witt's statements.

Dr. Witt said Dr. Conlon has substantial evidence of compromised patient care but chooses not to see it.

"I justified every line in that letter," he said.

Dr. Witt also said he was contacted within hours of his demotion by other organizations, including one that has an administrative opening.

More than 40 of Dr. Witt's supporters voiced their displeasure at his firing at a regular public meeting almost an hour, nurses, paramedics and members of the public demanded to know why the region

The health-care professionals said Dr. Witt's claims of compromised patient care are not unfounded

Nurse Karen Nieman said every person in the room could point to situations where "patient care has been compromised because of lack of staff and space.

Another nurse, Yvonne Friesen, agreed. In an exchange with Dr. Conlon, she said she had documented observations of lives being jeopardized.

"I guess that's a matter of debate or disagreement," said Dr. Conlon, who asked why Dr. Witt wouldn't provide names of people who have suffered.

"That's confidentiality," countered Ms. Friesen.

She told the meeting reports had been submitted through the proper nursing channels within the health region.

Dr. Conlon was adamant the region is not "trying to muzzle" Dr. Witt and that physicians are free to say what they like, but he added certain "administrative expectations" were not being met by Dr. Witt.

Documents obtained by the Saskatoon StarPhoenix show Dr. Witt was alerting senior administrators of unsafe conditions as early as January 2003 — a full year before writing to the minister of health.

Also on Wednesday, the hospital's emergency room doctors revealed they haven't received a pay cheque for more than six weeks as they wait for the health region to finalize the wording of a new contract.

"We haven't received a cent since our last cheque in the early part of February," said Dr. Randy McCuaig. "We're leaving messages [with health region administrators].

"We're trying to contact them and say, 'Hey, we're kind of running out of money here. We've got mortgages and car payments and other bills to pay.'"

The doctors were wondering if the delay is related to the region's deficit, which could be as high as \$12-million by the end of March.



The doctors reached an agreement with the health region in January for more money to hire four additional emergency physicians.

Jim Fergusson, chief executive for the health region, said he just learned Wednesday doctors hadn't been getting paid.

He said they should expect pay cheques in the next day or two. He also said the delay had to do with the wording of the new contract and said doctors were warned it might be six to eight weeks for the contract to be finalized.



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