

Hundreds of Alberta hospital beds to close

Last Updated: Wednesday, September 16, 2009 | 2:55 PM MT



Alberta Health Services CEO and president Stephen Duckett speaks to reporters Wednesday in Edmonton. (CBC)

Alberta will move hundreds of hospital patients to newly created community-based spaces over the next three years, the provincial health authority confirmed Wednesday.

Alberta Health Services told union representatives on Tuesday that 350 hospital beds in Calgary and Edmonton will be closed and patients moved to 775 community-based spaces.

The province has now confirmed the breakdown of bed closures in the two cities — 160 in Edmonton and 190 in Calgary. Of those beds, 20 in Edmonton and 40 in Calgary will be kept open this year to help with what officials called "emergency room pressures."

The government also revealed that 246 beds will be closed at Alberta Hospital over the next three years.

More than 100 patients — mostly elderly people with dementia or mental illnesses — will be moved to 150 beds set aside at Villa Caritas, the Covenant Health-operated facility in west Edmonton that will open next year.

The plan will save the province an estimated \$51.5 million by 2012. All hospital beds will be staffed until the community spaces are created.

The patients in the 350 beds destined for closure will be better cared for outside the hospital, Stephen Duckett, the president and CEO of Alberta Health Services, told reporters at a news conference.

"These people that we're talking about are people who are in our acute-care beds because — and only because — they can't get access to a community-care facility," he said. "They don't need acute care anymore. What they need is continuing care. Care in a nursing home or a designated assisted-living facility."

Alberta Health Services is trying to reduce a deficit that sat at \$1.3 billion at the beginning of the fiscal year.

It costs about \$57,000 a year to keep a patient in a nursing home and between \$150,000 and \$200,000 a year to keep one in an acute-care bed, Duckett said.

While word of the bed closures raised speculation about job losses, Duckett said such talk is premature.

"We are not going to consider layoffs until we work through the vacancy management program and the early retirement programs which are being negotiated with our unions," he said.

Bed cuts equivalent of closing a hospital, Liberal says

The announcement brought critical responses from opposition politicians.

"Moving long-term care patients out of an acute-care facility into an appropriate facility is a good idea," said Liberal MLA Kevin Taft. "Closing the beds that that frees up in acute-care hospitals is bad idea."

Taft said the bed closures were the equivalent of closing the Grey Nuns Hospital in Edmonton, which has just over 300 beds.

The plan will diminish the care provided to Alberta seniors, NDP MLA Rachel Notley said.

"The plan for this government is to move critically ill seniors from acute-care hospital beds into, primarily, facilities which are not regulated the same way, which are not inspected the same way, which are not governed the same way and which do not provide the same level of care," she said.

"The only thing that those facilities provide more of is bills. Bills for the people who live in them."

Hospital costs are covered by medicare, but patients in assisted living homes and nursing homes are expected to pay some of their costs.

David Eggen, executive director of public health care advocacy group Friends of Medicare, called the plan a "shell game."

"Clearly this is an attempt to hijack public health care by moving funds and beds out of hospitals and over to private contractors across the province," he said.

There is nothing wrong with moving people who shouldn't be in a hospital bed, but they should be placed in publicly-funded long-term care facilities instead, Eggen said.