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Royal bank cuts a loan - hospital beds close

More operating rooms to close over holidays

Patients who need elective procedures at University Hospital must wait

By Jodie Sinnema, Edmonton Journal December 5, 2009 Comments (25)

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Elective surgeries will be cut at the University of Alberta Hospital by 40 per cent over the Christmas season. Photograph by: Janna VanDorp, edmontonjournal.com Budget pressures are hitting the front lines at University Hospital, forcing some operating rooms to close for three weeks instead of the usual two weeks over the Christmas holidays.

That means more patients who need elective surgeries for cancer, heart problems or knee and hip replacements will have to wait longer for their operations, said Glenda Coleman-Miller, the hospital's vice-president.

From Dec. 16 to Jan. 6, nine of the 16 operating rooms will be used, cutting elective surgeries 40 per cent for those three weeks.

"The rationale behind that was to manage our costs more effectively by spreading out our expenses and to use the advantage of the holiday break schedule for both patients and our hospital staff, including the surgeons," Coleman-Miller said. "This is our normal strategy over the holiday period."

Coleman-Miller couldn't say how much money will be saved. She also didn't know if other hospitals such as the Royal Alexandra, Misericordia or Grey Nuns are also closing their operating rooms for longer periods than usual.

"It's really just reducing the activity," Coleman Miller said, emphasizing that emergency surgeries will still happen, with cancer patients remaining a priority.

Asked how this will affect patients, she said the "same question could be asked every year when we do this strategy, but we're trying to balance out being able to provide the service we need to (offer) in terms of balancing our costs."

Coleman-Miller said the hospital is also considering cutting the operating room schedule for a longer period of time in the summer when operations slow down for 10 weeks in June, July and August. A decision on this will be made early in the new year, she said.

"We're doing our best to maintain the service that we can and respond to our patient needs," Connie Miller said.

Liberal MLA Kevin Taft said reducing the number of operating rooms contradicts what Premier Ed Stelmach, Health Minister Ron Liepert and Alberta Health Services' CEO Stephen Duckett have insisted, that any cost savings meant to reduce the \$1.2 billion health deficit won't affect health services.

"This proves the obvious: patient services are being cut," Taft said. "There's no way for Ron Liepert and Stephen Duckett to save the money you're talking about without reducing patient services. This catches Ron Liepert and Stephen Duckett in a bit of a lie."

Taft said any savings through this approach are phoney, since the surgeries will still need to be done eventually.

"None of these surgeries are going away. They're just being deferred and in the deferral, often situations get worse and cost the system more money in the long term," Taft said. "As much as Alberta Health (Services) might spin this as just meeting patients' Christmas schedules, this means that a lot of patients are going to be struggling and limping and suffering through the next several weeks when they really should have had surgery."

Taft said the way to reduce surgical waiting times is by pumping more resources into hospitals, as was done earlier this year at the Royal Alexandra Hospital. However, when the innercity hospital started reducing waiting times for elective surgeries by filling every nursing position and spending money to keep all the operating rooms going full force, the hospital was ordered by Alberta Health Services to cut costs by 15 per cent in May to keep spending in line with the previous fiscal quarter. When that happened, surgeries for cancer patients were postponed, along with cataract surgeries and joint replacements.

"These are quick fixes that have long term problems," Taft said.

David Eggen, executive director of Friends of Medicare, said it's becoming normal for people in the health industry to believe whatever is opposite to what Duckett and Liepert say.

"They talk about reducing wait times and then close beds. They talk about looking for efficiencies and the budget deficit is ballooning geometrically over these past three years and more next year," Eggen said.

A presentation made by three top executives of Alberta Health Services to a B.C. audience in October suggested the health authority could face a deficit up to \$1 billion in 2010/11 on top of the current deficit.

To keep that figure down, Alberta's health superboard voted this week to borrow \$220 million for its operating budget.

"It's crazy," Eggen said. "It just seems unreal that they would choose to go to a commercial bank to borrow money for the operating budget of a ministry (that offers) perhaps the most essential service the government provides."

Eggen said the government has ample money in its \$13 billion Sustainability Fund.

"This seems to be crossing a line on how you would traditionally pay for essential services," Eggen said.

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