

## Hospital delays surgery for kids

### Doctors worry over untrained nurses in ICU

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A staffing shortage has hit the intensive-care unit at Alberta Children's Hospital, forcing health officials to delay surgeries and recruit nurses without critical-care training to provide relief on the ward.

Calgary Health Region representatives confirmed Friday they have rescheduled six child surgeries in the past two weeks because of the strains on the hospital's ICU.

The local health body also took the unusual step this week of calling on nurses from emergency and other areas to work in the unit -- a move that concerns some physicians who worry about underqualified staff dealing with potentially life-threatening situations.



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald  
 Marion Allen, right, says delays in children's surgeries are frustrating for parents and hard on the kids. Back surgery for Allen's daughter Angel, 5, left, was rescheduled last week.

At least one patient's family called the ICU problems "frustrating" and called on the local health authority to ensure no more surgeries are postponed.

"These are kids who don't understand what's going on," said Marion Allen, the mother of a five-year-old girl whose back surgery was rescheduled last week.

"It's very frustrating for the parents and I think it's really hard on the kids. . . . It's time for CHR to step up and do something about this."

CHR officials said they've been aggressively recruiting more nursing staff and are addressing the problem to the best of their ability. All surgeries that faced a delay have been rescheduled.

"We're trying to adjust our systems to be as responsive as they can be to the needs of the children," said Paula Tyler, vice-president of child and women's health at CHR.

The ICU problems at Alberta Children's Hospital come one month after an ICU bed shortage at Calgary's adult hospitals forced officials to postpone seven surgeries, including three urgent cases.

The space squeeze in critical care at Foothills, Rockyview and Peter Lougheed hospitals also led CHR to make contingency plans to transfer patients out of Calgary, although no one had to be moved.

Staffing at the children's hospital has been a growing problem for months, but officials say things recently become worse as the winter flu season led to an influx of young patients.

Although the hospital also had to delay procedures in the past, Tyler concedes that changes to six surgeries in two weeks is significant. During the past six months the hospital has rescheduled only about one operation a month, on average.

The latest cases had to be rescheduled because the patients had multiple medical problems that could cause complications. Physicians felt the children might require intensive care after their surgery and, without enough space in the ward to accommodate them, their procedures were rescheduled.

Allen's daughter Angel is one of those patients. The five-year-old has curvature of the spine and requires surgery every six months to readjust the steel rods in her back.

Alberta Children's Hospital initially scheduled a surgery for Angel in October, but postponed it until November. This week, staff called and rescheduled it again because of the ICU situation.

"The first couple of times it happened, I can understand. . . . Now I think there's a big problem," said Allen.

CHR officials said they're attempting to address the staffing issues, in part by "cross-training" nurses from other parts of the hospital to work in ICU.

Last week, they had an emergency room nurse with some ICU experience to assist on the unit. Officials also asked some registered nurses without critical care training to help on ICU, although they weren't involved in direct patient care.

"By early in the new year, we should have a small cadre of nurses who are fully trained and oriented who can come into ICU when needed," said the CHR's Tyler.

But some doctors are worried about outside nurses taking on the demanding and critical nature of the ICU before they've completed the training.

"The physicians are completely and utterly against it," said one doctor at the hospital who asked not to be named.

Tyler said she understands the concerns and is working with physicians. She noted the nurses are coming in one at a time, adding CHR will evaluate the situation to ensure it's working.

Representatives from the United Nurses of Alberta didn't return phone calls Friday.

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