

# TIMES COLONIST

## Island Health's deal with hospital doctors expires

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Island Health and about 72 hospital-based doctors at Victoria's two main hospitals are once again at a stand-off after an interim deal reached last summer expired Saturday. Photograph By Darren Stone, Victoria Times-Colonist

Island Health and about 72 hospital-based doctors at Victoria's two main hospitals are once again at a stand-off after an interim deal reached last summer expired Saturday.

The original contract between Island Health and Victoria Hospitalist Physicians Inc. expired at midnight June 30, 2014.

A few days later, an interim agreement was hammered out. As a sign of the fevered pitch of the negotiations, the interim deal was written out and pieced together on chunks of paper.

The agreement was made in the hopes that a long-term contract would be worked out in the fall. That didn't happen and the agreement rolled on into the new year, then came to an abrupt end on Feb. 28.

Both sides in the dispute argued last year that the contract talks were not about money, but about how the job is performed and by how many doctors.

Island Health wants the hospitalists to work under a new model that's aimed at bringing together a team of doctors to work together to produce faster results and more timely discharges for patients. The health authority didn't want to extend or renegotiate the old contract.

The hospitalists argued they already had a collaborative and efficient approach that worked best for patients and doctors and that Island Health's plan included cutbacks. More hospitalists are needed, they said.

Despite the dispute, both sides say patients will continue to receive the best care possible.

In January, Island Health issued an "expression of interest" seeking individual hospitalists, or physicians qualified to provide hospitalist services or a group to provide hospitalist services at Victoria General Hospital and Royal Jubilee Hospital.

Island Health said it would not negotiate in the media when asked about the intent of the job postings. "We have had expressions of interest from several groups and individuals; the previous contract holder is not one of those who has chosen to submit a proposal under the EOI," said Island Health in a statement on Wednesday.

"Island Health's priority is to deliver top-quality, safe, accessible, appropriate and compassionate care for all our patients — and hospitalists play a key role in this care," said Island Health spokeswoman Suzanne Germain. "We truly value the care and quality of care our individual hospitalists provide."

Lawyer David McWhinnie, acting for the doctors' group, said the hospitalists had been actively engaged in contract negotiations with Island Health for some time.

"However, earlier this year, Island Health walked away from the negotiations and announced that it was ending its contract with the hospitalists on Feb. 28, 2015," McWhinnie said in an email.

"At the end of the day, the hospitalists just want to be able to do their jobs and to help their patients."

The hospital-based doctors say they would return to negotiations immediately if Island Health would come back to the table.

"The hospitalists don't understand why Island Health is resisting negotiations or what it intended would be the outcome of ending their contract," McWhinnie said.

Island Health stopped paying the corporation that pays the hospitalists on March 1.

It was the interim payment of these doctors without a contract that proved highly contentious last year.

To be paid now, the physicians must sign a "flexible" long or short-term contract with Island Health or bill the Medical Services Plan through fee for service.

Hospitalists argued last year that to bill through MSP would result in being paid for only a fraction of their work, as there are no billing codes for some of what they do, such as liaising with other health professionals and agencies to help patients who are often very sick and have multiple problems.

The agreement that served the hospital-based doctors until now had preserved features of the expired contract and allowed the doctors, who are subcontractors, to be paid through their corporation.

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