

Nurses overreaching in fight with LPNs

BY JOHN GORMLEY, THE STARPHOENIX SEPTEMBER 26, 2014

Long before the turf war being waged against licensed practical nurses by the powerful Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN), there were the TV ads - those eye-roll inducing SUN ads of nurses saving lives and being health care's "experts with the knowledge, skills and ability to intervene."

Registered nurses are skilled and important participants among many in a complex array of health care professions. But for goodness' sake, they're not winning the Nobel Prize in Medicine. They're nurses.

So why did they need TV ads? Obviously designed as a positioning or branding campaign, the ads are created by a wealthy union trying to cultivate a public perception of how important nurses are (and hence how much more they should be paid) as SUN enters a new round of union contract talks with the health regions.

At this point, recalling the 35 per cent wage increase that bumped a nurse's annual salary from \$64,000 to \$85,000 six years ago, many taxpayers will need a great deal of persuading to throw more money the way of nurses even if, as their ads imply, they are the very heart and soul of all health care.

In my experience - except for a couple of notable instances of an officious nurse waddling around barking orders on a hospital ward - to a person, I've never met a nurse who wasn't highly skilled, helpful, empathetic and engaged.

And great nurses don't need TV ads to tell the world how well they do their jobs. In fact, sometimes it seems the more a person repeatedly reminds you how valuable and needed they are, the more it raises doubt.

Now, SUN has taken on the Saskatchewan Association of Licensed Practical Nurses (SALPN), the regulatory body that sets out practice standards and discipline for LPNs.

Accusing LPNs of exceeding their training and trying to extend their practice into what is now done by RNs, nurses' union president Tracy Zambory says "it is extremely troubling and appears to us that the LPN scope would encompass close to 99 per cent of what a registered nurse does today."

Precisely what a trade union has to do with nursing standards is not clear.

The public interest, patient safety and scope of practice are determined by SALPN and, in the case of RNs, by their governing body, the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association (SRNA).

Both SRNA and SALPN will work this out. If not, the provincial government, which ultimately regulates and pays for all hospital care, will referee.

It's almost as if there is something existential here for SUN. And there may be.

On a vertical axis, physicians, medical residents, nurse practitioners (and one day, physician assistants) are all above the skill sets of a registered nurse.

Below are LPNs, who do everything from brush a patient's hair and rub their back at bedtime to insert IVs and administer medications.

This is more about the RNs' trade union than its individual members. Today a complex 177-page collective agreement governs the employment of SUN members; it is onerous and cumbersome.

Anyone trying to run or staff a modern workplace should read just the 14-page "hours of work" Article 7 of the SUN collective agreement, then thank their lucky stars they're not in the health field.

Combine this with a salary exceeding \$85,000 and a union culture preferring to carve out responsibilities and exclude others, it is easy to contemplate how health care roles and duties could be pushed up or down beyond what RNs regard as their scope of practice.

This could ultimately result in less work for registered nurses. And, for their union, this means less money and less influence.

The delivery of world-class health care is not about turf wars, practice areas or trade unions. It is about appropriate skills acquisition and training, demonstrated expertise, best practices, continued improvement and patient safety outcomes. The problem for RNs is nothing less or more than the market and where their skills and services are priced.

It may seem harsh but human actions - from choosing products to hiring in health care - will always gravitate toward the more efficient and less difficult.

And all the TV ads in the world won't change this.