

# Province orders review of Fraser Health; Budget, overcrowding concerns spark probe weeks after patient discharged wearing bed sheet

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## ABSTRACT

Last year Fraser Health was directed to take immediate steps to reduce infection rates of *C. difficile* as well as speed up admissions to emergency departments, provide quicker access to hip-fracture operations and reduce the length of hospital stays at its regional hospitals.

## FULL TEXT

The Fraser Health Authority has failed to meet its budget three years in a row despite funding increases that outpace its rapid population growth, Health Minister Terry Lake said.

The ministry of health has ordered a review to probe persistent fiscal difficulties and hospital congestion issues that have plagued the fastest growing health authority in the province. The review will focus on the authority's operations and leadership.

Fraser Health Authority's population grew an average 1.3 per cent annually over the past three years and the authority received, on average, a six per cent budget increase each of those years. Other health authorities received an average 4.8 per cent annual budget increase.

"This doesn't add up to us and that's why we have to do this comprehensive review," Lake said Friday.

In comparison, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's population grew 1.25 per cent annually over the same period and received annual budget increases averaging 4.5 per cent. Increases are not based purely on demographic changes but also factors such as service demands and projected needs. The annual provincial population growth rate was one per cent. Fraser Health Authority has been beset by overcrowding issues.

Just weeks after Surrey Memorial Hospital opened its state-of-the-art emergency department last month, patients are again being treated in hallways.

In early October, Fraser Health CEO Nigel Murray apologized to a 90-yearold woman who was sent home from Delta Hospital at 2 a.m. in pyjamas and without shoes. Vivian Fitzpatrick was discharged from Delta Hospital and sent home by cab, bleeding from a medical procedure and wrapped in a bed sheet.

The B.C. Nurses' Union said Friday that overcrowding in Fraser Health emergency rooms has led to unsafe and chaotic patient care.

Last year Fraser Health was directed to take immediate steps to reduce infection rates of *C. difficile* as well as speed up admissions to emergency departments, provide quicker access to hip-fracture operations and reduce the length of hospital stays at its regional hospitals. As well, emergency room doctors at Royal Columbian served notice to administrators last year saying they would no longer assess patients in hallways or lobbies.

Some physicians were forced to assess and treat patients in the hospital's Tim Hortons in order to retain a modicum of patient privacy.

The ministry-led strategic and operational review has not been sparked by any one incident, Lake said.

"The concern for us is Fraser Health has not been able to manage the budget targets and we want to understand why," Lake said. "The other health authorities have managed to do this."

Fraser Health receives \$2.5 billion annually and serves 1.6 million people through 13 hospitals including Burnaby, Royal Columbian, Langley Memorial, Peace Arch and Surrey Memorial.

While praising the authority's board, Lake said he wants to examine everything from the authority's operational plan and management to the balance between primary and acute care, and whether the authority's geographic boundaries are appropriate.

Lake has asked the Fraser Health board to produce a three-year strategic and operational plan by the end of May 2014 and to submit a revised fiscal plan for the remainder of this fiscal year, ending March 31. In addition, a review committee consisting of staff from the ministry of health, ministry of finance and key people from the provincial authority and other regional health authorities will work with the board to identify areas in need of work.

Murray said the strategic review couldn't have come at a better time, noting the authority has been struggling to maintain and expand its services.

He maintains the biggest challenge for Surrey Memorial is that while the province provided all the capital funds to complete the project on time and on budget, the hospital is experiencing unprecedented growth. The emergency ward saw an increase of 16 to 20 per cent after it opened, he noted, with the number of pediatric patients increasing about 50 per cent.

Wayne Wright, mayor of New Westminister, said his city's Royal Columbian Hospital needs significant improvements.

"I can sum it up very quickly. You've got old facilities that need expansion and need upgrades," Wright said, adding that an aging population puts a strain on resources, and keeping people with serious mental health issues on the streets rather than in suitable facilities contributes to clogged emergency rooms.

Murray said Surrey Memorial has received its "fair share" of funding but stopped short of saying whether it was enough to operate the expanded system. He noted the province provided startup funding to get staff ready for the new and complex emergency equipment as well as boosting the operating funding to accommodate hundreds of extra staff.

"There wouldn't be a health authority in Canada that doesn't need more funding," Murray said. "The government has been very clear in giving us the funds that we need and I'm very confident we get our fair share."

Fraser Health had a one-per-cent gap in their budget last year and early indications are this year's budget overrun may be about the same, Lake said. He expects to have a better grasp on the numbers by the end of the month. If the review determines the authority needs more funding, the difference will have to come from core ministry operations, Lake said, as the ministry is expected to meet its \$16.4-billion 2013/2014 budget.

"The cost of health care can't outpace the growth we see in our economy," he said.

"We've been very clear that we need to bend the cost curve down on increases in health because it's simply not sustainable."

No other health authorities will get additional budget increases.

"We are confident the other health authorities will manage their budgets within target," Lake said. "This certainly will not affect them in terms of any reduction in their budgets. We'll have to find this from the core ministry operations."

Lake said the Canadian health care system set up in the 1960s needs to be adapted to meet changing conditions. The solution isn't necessarily service cuts, but a systemic review.

"The answer to every problem is not more money," he said.

Murray said the review will look at ways to configure services and provide them in a more modern, innovative way, such as helping patients in the community before they have to come into emergency.

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Credit: Jenny Lee, Kelly Sinoski, Jeff Lee and Matthew Robinson; Vancouver Sun

## Illustration

Jenelle Schneider, PNG Files / Jenelle Not long after Surrey Memorial Hospital opened its state-of-the-art emergency department, patients are again being treated in hallways and lobbies.; Glenn Baglo, PNG Files / Fraser Health CEO, Dr. Nigel Murray, welcomes the strategic review and says the hospital is experiencing unprecedented growth.; Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun Files / In early October, a 90-year-old woman was discharged from Delta Hospital at 2 a.m. in pyjamas and without shoes. She was sent home by cab.; Caption:

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