

Source name

Saltwire - Nova Scotia (web site)

Saturday, March 4, 2023

Source type

Press • Online Press

Saltwire - Nova Scotia (web site) • 1118 words

Periodicity

Continuously

Geographical coverage

Provincial

Origin

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Surgeons say renting hospital ORs on weekends will help patients who are waiting too long; critics call for more transparency

Elizabeth Payne · Postmedia News ; Posted: a day ago ; Updated: a day ago ; 5 Min Read

The group of Ottawa orthopedic surgeons renting operating rooms at the Riverside hospital on Saturdays say they are responding to the urgent needs of patients who are waiting too long for hip and knee surgeries.

"As surgeons, we hear the distress, pain and limitations to the quality of life our patients are experiencing. The need to act is now to respond to these patient concerns," members of the private corporation Academic Orthopedic Surgical Associates of Ottawa said in a statement.

"This is why, as surgeons, we have come together to launch the Academic Orthopedic Surgical Associates of Ottawa (AOAO) as a new model of care to help reduce the surgical backlog and provide much-needed care to our patients in the region."

It is the first time the group of 26 orthopedic surgeons, who began performing hip and knee surgeries at the Riverside campus of The Ottawa Hospital last weekend, has spoken about the issue.

Information from the hospital and the province has been limited.

The surgeries have been the focus of intense scrutiny and concern from across Ontario unions, opposition politicians and others, in part because Ottawa Hospital health workers have been approached while on the job about working for the group on Saturdays at rates higher than they earn in the public system. Registered nurses have been offered \$750 per day, registered practical nurses have been offered \$550 per day and clerical staff have been offered \$600 a day.

Provincial officials, who have called the model innovative, have also given assurances that private surgeries will not poach staff from the public system, which is struggling with worsening staffing shortages. The Ottawa Hospital has at least 515 nursing vacancies, according to the Ontario Nurses Association, the labour organization representing nurses there. Its members rallied at the Riverside last week to protest the outsourcing of surgeries.

Both The Ottawa Hospital and AOAO

have said the surgeries are part of a "cost recovery model" allowing the hospital to provide more access to care for patients. Hospital officials say they receive more provincial funding for hip and knee surgeries than they have capacity -- in the form of staffing -- to use. Saturday surgeries, a hospital spokesperson said, help close that gap.

But many observers continue to have questions, including about the model's costs to taxpayers.

"Transparency is required," said Colleen Flood, a law professor and university research chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Ottawa.

"If private surgical clinics are operating on Saturdays in public hospitals is a solution, then that is great; but we need to know that are not robbing Peter to pay Paul or setting up incentives that will only increase costs and worsen HR (human resources) shortages."

Ontario Nurses Association representatives met Friday with hospital officials to discuss the issue. Rachel Muir, a registered nurse and ONA local bargaining

unit president at The Ottawa Hospital, said the meeting left her with more questions.

Among other things, Muir said she learned that the corporation planned to do 120 surgeries on Saturdays and had leased the operating rooms for six months. It performed 10 surgeries last Saturday. She said the surgeons involved were from across the region, according to the hospital. She said hospital officials told her the corporation was looking at using Riverside as a trial and a way to estimate costs of eventually setting up their own facility.

No details of the financial agreement with the hospital have been released, but, under a temporary provision in the OHIP billing schedule of benefits aimed at reducing surgical backlogs, surgeons performing surgeries on Saturdays -- even elective surgery -- receive 150 per cent of their normal service fees.

AOAO says it is a group of 26 orthopedic surgeons in Ottawa "working together in the interest of our patients. We have assembled a team of experienced and committed health-care professionals who all share in improving the situation for musculoskeletal care such as joint replacement patients in our region." The Ottawa Hospital lists 31 orthopedic surgeons in its physician directory.

It is believed to be the first time in Ontario a hospital has rented its operating room space to a private corporation. Officials at The Ottawa Hospital have said other hospitals are watching with interest.

Muir said she expected to see other such models set up around Ontario. "This is a provincial concern. If they are doing it here, they are planning to do it some-

where else."

She said the union continued to have concerns about the poaching of staff, staff and patient safety and the implications of having private health care provided on public property. Among her concerns are that nurses working on Saturdays aren't covered by insurance if something goes wrong. She also said there were signs that the private group was using some public resources, including the patient record system and follow-up services. She said the agreement with the corporation was confidential, so it was unclear how that and other hospital support would be costed in the agreement with AOAO. She also said medical staff working with the group had been told to sign confidentiality agreements.

Numerous critics and observers have called for more transparency around the model and how it is financially and practically structured, with many asking why Ontario doesn't pay more to keep operating rooms open longer to reduce surgical backlogs instead of allowing for-profit groups to rent hospital facilities, which ultimately costs taxpayers more. The provincial government has been underspending on health care to the tune of millions, according to the independent Financial Accountability Office.

A key concern is that models like the one at Riverside will further gut the public system if private providers can pay nurses and other health workers. Health Minister Sylvia Jones addressed that concern when the province introduced Bill 60 earlier this year, allowing for more surgeries at private clinics. She said organizations wanting to do the surgeries would have to show a plan for

human resources in order to be approved. It is unclear whether there is any recourse if private companies draw hospital workers.

Meanwhile, AOAO says it is critical to find innovative solutions to relieve patients' pain and help them get their lives back.

"This is about patients care and improving access to that care."

Ottawa, and The Ottawa Hospital specifically, has some of the longest wait times in Ontario for hip and knee surgeries, according to provincial data.

Related Critics 'alarmed' by private surgery plan they say will poach staff from the public health system Nurses rally at Riverside Campus to protest plans to 'outsource' surgeries

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