



United Nurses of Alberta Local 115 Newsletter

Issue 2

January 2004

Heather Smith has "a passion" for nurses and the advocacy role they play

Susan Ruttan, Journal health Writer, Edmonton

The last time Alberta's nurses went on strike, Heather Smith was in the thick of it. As vice-chairwoman of the United Nurses of Alberta negotiating committee, she was a key player in the 19-day-illegal strike.

Fifteen years later, the nurses are looking at another possible strike, and Smith is once ore a key player – in fact, the key player.

She has been UNA president since just a few months after the end of the 1988 strike and commands fierce loyalty from the union's 20,000 members.

Smith, now 48, sees ominous parallels between 1988 and this year. In both cases, there was a shortage of nurses, a lot of dissatisfaction about working conditions and a list of contract rollbacks from hospital managers.

This year, says Smith, that list is even longer than 15 years ago.

"Nobody really wins with a strike," said Smith in an

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Negotiations

UNA Negotiations News

the latest from the bargaining table

Thursday December 11, 2003

- Met with the PHAA on December 10 (Multi Employer talks) and December 11 (Bill 27 related negotiations for Chinook Health Region).
- No significant move by either party.
- An Arbitration Board has been appointed comprised of Lyle Kanee (UNA nominee), Bill Armstrong (Employer nominee) and Andy Sims (Chair). UNA agreed to the appointment of Andy Sims as this creates an opportunity for talks with Mr. Sims acting as a facilitator. UNA reaffirmed that while we will pursue resolution with the assistance of the Board, we will not participate in any Compulsory Arbitration hearing OR any process that results in an imposed collective agreement.
- The Negotiating Committee continues to evaluate the timing of a Reporting Meeting.❖



SPOTLIGHT on your UNA Contract

For Professional Safety Reasons Insist on reasonable orientation

Some RNs are being "floated" to units with little or no orientation to the procedures of the unit. The practice can put patients, and their nurses, at risk.

What happens if you are "floated" to a unit you are unfamiliar with and something goes wrong? You are responsible for your practice even if the Employer has assigned you to a unit or position

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interview Tuesday in her downtown office.

The fact that nurses are even willing to contemplate an illegal walkout shows the level of frustration they feel about the current bargaining impasse, she said.

Smith has met the strong push from the nine health regions for contract concessions with characteristic defiance.

When the regions presented their list of demands last January, she told them: "As a union we go forward, we don't go back." Eleven months later, the two sides remain at loggerheads.

Bev Dick, UNA's vice-president, says Smith's fearlessness with both employers and the Klein government comes from a deep belief in what she's doing. It also comes from the knowledge that her union members back her 100 percent, said Dick.

"She truly has this passion in her heart to try to make nursing a better place for people who are on the front lines," she said.

Smith sees her toughness as no more than the advocacy role that all nurse play. Whether you're a hospital nurse demanding adequate towels to give your patient a comforting bath, or a nurses' union leader speaking up in defense of public health care, it's the same thing, she said.

"Nurses are not shrinking violets – you can't be," said Smith.

UNA's political activism, including its support for the Friends of Medicare lobby group, is a similar extension of that advocacy role, she said.

Smith annually asks UNA members whether they're happy with UNA's high-profile criticism of for-profit medicine; they always say they are.

Fellow union leaders are full of praise for Smith.

"She has a good sharp mind," says Les Steel, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour. "She can analyze issues very quickly. She'll keep asking questions till she gets it right."

Don MacNeil, regional head of the Communications, Energy and Paper-workers Union, admires the totally loyalty Smith commands from her members.

"She faces the slings and arrows and she seems to take it all in stride," said MacNeil. "Even when she was injured and had family troubles, she just keeps slugging away."

Two years ago Smith and UNA's chief bargainer, David Harrigan, were in a serious highway accident. She had multiple injuries, including a shattered knee, and spent long months in rehabilitation, going from wheelchair to walker to cane.

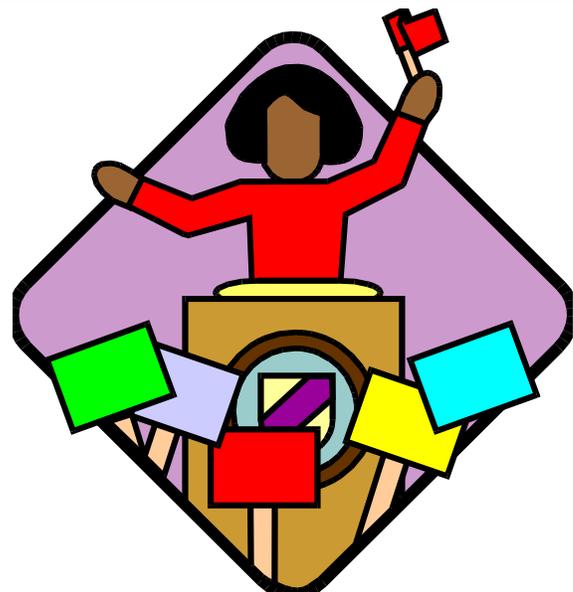
Last month she suffered the deaths of her mother and her brother.

Originally from the Ottawa area, Smith came here in 1976, primarily for reasons of the heart. She and husband David Allen have been together 27 years. They have two cats, Max and Dot.

Life as one of Alberta's leading union presidents is never dull.

"Personally I find negotiating very challenging and exciting," she said.

Smith makes no predictions about her future with UNA. She's been asked repeatedly to run for political office, but for the moment it doesn't tempt her. There's plenty of opportunity to advocate for good causes without joining the ranks of politicians, she said. ❖



Nominations

Local 115

Position: Treasurer

**Accepted now until
January 14, 2004 @ 16:00.**

where you have not been orientated or sufficiently prepared.

Protect yourself—insist on adequate orientation and if that has not been provided, file a Professional Responsibility Committee (PRC) complaint immediately.

Staffing problems are NO excuse for management practices that compromise safe, quality care to professional standards. If you encounter a safety or staffing problem that you find professionally unacceptable, there is something you can do about it. Contact UNA. ❖

Are you on UNA Net?

UNA Net is a private communication system available only to UNA Members. Current information regarding contract negotiations, your local and UNA events is available on UNA Net. You'll also have the opportunity to present your opinions and thoughts about negotiations as well as professional issues. Join us and communicate with your fellow registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses in Alberta.

What to do if you require an account?

Send an email including your name, address, local number, and your UNA ID number to systems@una.ab.ca. They will need to know what operating system is on your computer (Windows or Macintosh) and if you have high speed or dial up access to the internet.

Once your membership has been verified you will be given immediate access to the system.

Logging in with software or a browser

The UNA Net is accessible using a web browser or client software.

To log in with your web browser, go to <https://www.unitednurses.org/login> and enter your User ID and Password.

Even better though, the client software provides a desktop application that is optimized for fast, streamlined access to the FirstClass server. It is easy to install and use, by choosing the software download html link.

Windows & Macintosh Software Link:

<http://www.unitednurses.org/clientDownloads/>

Technical Support:

The technical support team is available by email systemsupport@una.ab.ca or by phone toll free at (800) 252-8384 during regular office hours. ❖



Nurses say there is imminent danger after testing shows toxic mould contamination at Foothills unit

Over 45 nurses and other Employees have filed Occupational Health and Safety imminent danger complaints on the mould-affected unit at the Foothills Medical Centre. The nurses filed the complaints after results came back from the testing by indoor air quality expert Karen Rollins that showed contamination of toxic moulds in several locations.

“Although the investigation has covered only about 10% of the floor area, I feel that there is enough evidence to warrant great concern,” Rollins said in her report to the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA). “There are toxigenic fungi present in several locations and nurses are reporting symptoms associated with toxigenic fungi. I am also concerned for the patients who receive dialysis and who are already immune compromised, and for any other staff who work on Unit 27. I recommend closing Unit 27 until a thorough investigation and remediation can be completed.”

Over 70 nurses from the dialysis unit have experienced health problems, ranging from bleeding noses to respiratory difficulties.

The imminent danger notices were filed with the Foothills Medical Centre this week. The CHR has responded to the nurses and other employees that it has determined there is no imminent danger on Unit 27. The next step is filing a complaint with Alberta Workplace Health and Safety, which must appoint an Occupational Health and Safety officer to investigate the Employees' concerns.

“ No one should be working in this unit while this investigation and remediation is occurring,” says

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Foothills UNA President Michelle Senkow. "The Region should close the unit and keep all occupants out of harms way. The number of health complaints is rising every day."

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act the nurses have a right and responsibility not to work if, on reasonable and probable grounds, there exists an imminent danger to their health or safety. In their notice to the Health Region the nurses have indicated: "As an RN, I have professional responsibilities to my patients. Accordingly, I will continue to provide appropriate patient care in order that CHR can implement arrangements to provide for my patients' care in a safe location."

The nurses filed the imminent danger notice this week because of the new evidence from Rollins' testing.

Karen Rollins had been on a joint Alberta Workplace Health and Safety technical committee that had commenced sampling earlier this year. Some of the samples had uncovered toxic mould but that committee was disbanded in August and access to the unit for the UNA expert representative for testing was stopped. A court decision on November 12 granted Rollins further access and the ability to take samples in conjunction with the action plan being implemented by the hospital. The latest results come from this renewed testing.❖



**Event: Local 115
General Meeting
Date: January 21, 2004
Time: 16:00 – 18:00
Place: Coombes Theatre
Foothills Hospital**





United Nurses of Alberta

Local 115 Contacts

(President - Michelle Senkow is ex-officio to all committees. Please call the local office to speak to her about any of these committees or concerns)

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