

Temporary closure at Headwaters' emergency department due to staff shortage

By Paula Brown

Headwaters Health Care Centre (HHCC) temporarily closed its emergency department overnight this past weekend in response to a staffing shortage.

The local hospital issued a notice on Saturday (July 16) saying it made the "difficult decision" to redirect all non-life-threatening situations at the emergency department to surrounding hospitals from 7 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.

Kim Delahunt, President and CEO of Headwaters Hospital, said the redirect was due to an unprecedented shortage of nursing staff and sick calls from staff members in the emergency department.

"This was a last resort and the decision was made after all other options and mitigations were exhausted," wrote Delahunt in an email. "The decision was not taken lightly and required a lot of communication with our team, first responders, physicians, and leaders."

Headwaters Health Care Centre is among a number of hospitals across the province and nation facing staffing shortages. Recently, hospitals in Mount Forest and Alexandria, Ont. both announced overnight closures of their emergency departments as a result of too few nursing staff available.

Staffing pressures in hospitals have been connected to various issues including burnout from the pandemic, nurses and other providers leaving hospitals to work in other settings, more sick calls, and staff taking their allotted vacation time.

"[It] is important that staff take their vacation. They need to recharge. It has been a relentless two plus years," said Delahunt.

To deal with the shortage in staffing, Headwaters, like many hospitals, has focused on recruitment and retention. But, with a nation-wide and global shortage of nurses, many hospitals are competing for the same human resources making those efforts challenging.

Delahunt said the hospital has been working to mitigate issues such as the one that happened over the weekend, but added it's not possible to predict the future.

"Our teams planned ahead and had contingencies in place, yet still we were in a situation where there were more sick calls than anticipated."

Delahunt noted that the decision to redirect non-life-threatening situations at the hospital's emergency department came after all other options had been exhausted including issuing staffing shift broadcasts, offering incentives, and moving staff to differing units or upstaffing.

Headwaters' emergency department resumed all services on July 17 at 7:30 a.m.