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Joining forces good for N.S. health care

By TIM DUNNE

The Canadian Forces Surgeon General has embedded medical specialists and nurses in the provincial health-care system. The Halifax Infirmity and Dartmouth General have military physicians who specialize in orthopedics, anesthesia and internal medicine, and Amherst has a military anesthesiologist, all at no cost to the Nova Scotia taxpayer.

Our military's nursing profession is following suit. Military nurses have been embedded within Capital District Health Authority for the past two years.

“And this is the year that we launch the official program for the nurses' High Readiness Detachment,” says the detachment's commander, Maj. Melissa Devine. “Within five years, the goal is to have 16 nurses embedded in local hospitals ... to maintain their clinical skills.”

Although not a usual rotation for military nurses, one of the local placements includes the IWK Health Centre as part of the CF Maintenance of Clinical Readiness Program. Maj. Devine explains, “The purpose of the program is to provide a clinical environment where the nurses can maintain their nursing competencies. Up to 15 per cent of the patients our medical teams treated in Kandahar were children, and children can't be treated like little adults.”

Military nursing officers need clinical experience in pediatrics. Children's medication and fluid administration are different. “They don't have the same communication skills as adults and can't always tell you where it hurts and how they feel,” Maj. Devine added.

Pediatrics is becoming a standard requirement in Canada's military and humanitarian operations.

Fifteen years ago, Canadian Forces cutbacks resulted in dramatic changes to health services. Military hospitals no longer operated 24 hours a day, seven days per week. As a consequence, sailors, soldiers, airwomen and airmen were referred to local civilian hospitals for in-patient care and hospitalization.

Previously, Halifax's military hospital was a fully functioning in-patient facility that accepted civilian medical students and residents, exactly like any of the hospitals in the community. But these reductions in the Forces and a re-evaluation of how the CF provides care to its personnel have meant a decrease in in-patient services. It wouldn't be economically viable to maintain a fully functioning hospital for the few patients requiring round-the-clock care.

From the reduction of military patients in the Canadian Forces' medical facilities, concern grew that medical specialists, practitioners and nurses may not have the exposure to medical conditions that would enable them to maintain their critical skills. As with their civilian counterparts, military medical practitioners have to be sharp and ready at a moment's notice, so CF specialists, nurses and physician assistants are embedded all across the country in various hospitals.

Military members requiring in-patient care now use local hospitals. That means that military medical professionals need a program to maintain their skills at a very high level to meet operational needs in Kandahar, Haiti or anywhere else the Canadian government decides military medical skills are needed.

The Maintenance of Clinical Readiness Program (MCRP) was created to embed medical specialists and nurses in civilian hospitals across Canada to ensure that medical practitioners are able to maintain their medical skills for when they deploy.

Military personnel within the MCRP augment, not replace, their equivalents within the provincial health-care system.

Internal medicine specialist Lt.-Col. Paul Charlebois has been engaged in the MCRP for seven years and works at both Dartmouth General and the Halifax Infirmary. Through his work at the Infirmary, he also has an assistant professorship at Dalhousie University's School of Medicine to help train physicians. He has just returned from his fourth deployment to Afghanistan.

"Like me, most physicians within the CDHA have some exposure to teaching opportunities," explained Lt.-Col. Charlebois. "Working within the department of medicine at the Halifax Infirmary involves teaching students in the faculty of medicine, and because I am one of only six internists within the Canadian Forces, I also teach at the various Canadian Forces medical facilities across the country.

"One of the biggest benefits to the MCRP is when our military members need more specialized in-patient care at a local hospital. As I work daily with these individuals, if I have a patient with a kidney problem and I need to speak with a nephrologist, well I know all the nephrologists. I am not just a voice at the end of the phone or a faceless military doctor; I am a colleague. That level of co-operation back and forth is invaluable."

This is a win for the Canadian Forces and the Nova Scotia health-care system.

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