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Island Health aims to contract out up to 55,000 day procedures

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Island Health hopes to conclude contract negotiations with Calgary-based Surgical Centres Inc. Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, Times Colonist

Island Health is hammering out a deal with a Calgary-based company to contract out up to 55,000 publicly funded day procedures to reduce wait-lists over the next three to five years.

In coming weeks, the health authority aims to conclude contract negotiations with Surgical Centres Inc., which operates Nanaimo's Seafield Surgical Centre, as well as clinics in New Westminster, Regina, Saskatoon and Calgary.

Norm Peters, Island Health's executive director for surgical services, said the two sides are completing details for volumes of surgeries, types of procedures, location and timelines.

"We are optimistic that we'll have something going in early 2016," Peters said Wednesday.

Once the contract is signed and the space is leased, renovated and equipped, the facility must be accredited by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C.

In April, Island Health requested proposals for private clinics to provide up to 4,000 day surgeries — such as hip, knee, shoulder and hernia repairs, varicose vein procedures, and gall-bladder removals — each year over a three- to five-year contract for a maximum of 20,000 procedures.

It was also looking for a private clinic to provide up to 4,000 colonoscopies on the south Island and up to 3,000 in the central Island each year over the same period, to a maximum of 35,000.

The preferred lease site for the Victoria clinic is believed to be the five-storey professional office building in the new \$100-million Eagle Creek Village.

The site, at Helmcken Road and Watkiss Way near Victoria General Hospital in View Royal, is being developed by Vancouver-based Omicron.

Jessica Ng, Omicron's development manager, confirmed it's in negotiations with the Surgical Centres to lease out 15,000 square feet on the third floor of the professional office space.

"Hopefully, they choose us as a preferred location," Ng said.

The preferred site must meet the requirements of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C. and be near a hospital for the convenience of patients, staff and doctors, Peters said.

"That does narrow it down to a few locations," he said.

The proponent has confirmed the site would be ready to meet Island Health's timelines, Peters said.

The B.C. Health Ministry, as outlined in a document called Future Directions for Surgical Services in B.C., is moving toward shifting appropriate publicly funded day surgeries to private clinics.

It is also exploring ways to allow stays of up to three days as part of a long-term strategy to manage wait-lists in the province. Overnight stays would require changes to the Hospital Act.

Peters said overnight stays won't be part of this contract.

"There is a desire provincially to look at that as a future stage, but that is not part of this initial contract with the preferred proponent."

Island Health began awarding contracts for day surgeries to private clinics in 2004.

The NDP has said Island Health's call for contracts is an entrenchment of stop-gap measures where use of private clinics to reduce wait times drains funding, doctors and nurses from the public to the private system.

"It's a worrisome trend," NDP critic Judy Darcy said when the plan to contract out was announced. She called the contract a short-term fix and just the tip of the iceberg in the move toward long-term privatization.

Peters said contracting out day procedures to private clinics saves Island Health millions in capital costs, reduces wait times for day surgeries, and opens up hospital operating room time for more complex surgeries.

"This is not the privatization of health-care services," Peters said.

"This is a benefit overall to not only those people waiting for surgery but it's a cost-effective way of delivering health care so we can invest in other areas."

Of 541,885 publicly funded surgeries in B.C. in 2013-14, 5,503 were done in private facilities.

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