Quebec’s top nurse vows to continue fight to make university degrees mandatory

Written by Mark Cardwell on January 24, 2014

Angry, confused, disappointed.

That’s how the president and general manager of the Quebec Order of Nurses says she felt earlier this month when she learned that provincial Health Minister Réjean Hébert had rejected the proposal from a committee he created to make a Bachelor’s degree the minimum requirement for nurses in Quebec, the only province where it is not.

We don’t need another committee to tell us what we already know—that the Quebec healthcare system badly needs nurses with the science background and training required to deal with the complex situations they are being increasingly confronted with both inside and outside of hospital settings.

“It was a very near-sighted decision for a project with a vision for the future,” Lucie Tremblay told NurseNewsline shortly after the minister’s announcement on Jan. 8. “(This project) is a lever of change. Without it things remain the same.”

Hébert blamed a lack of consensus among the 11 major educational, health care and labour organizations he named to a working group he created in Dec. 2012 to study the issue of nurse education and training in Quebec.

The driving force behind the group was a proposal generated by the Quebec Order of Nurses in June, 2011—which was approved twice since at the Order’s annual general meetings—to make a university degree mandatory for nurses in Quebec, and be applicable for program admissions in 2014.

In his report to the minister, working group president Dr. Pierre Durand said it was impossible to get a consensus over the Order’s proposition in 11 meetings held during 2013.

The most stringent opposition came from Quebec’s CEGEPs, which issue technical nursing degrees, and the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec, a labour organization that regroups 61 unions with 62,000 nursing and other technical health care professionals in 152 health-care facilities.

As a result, Dr. Durand submitted his report, which is available on the Order’s website in his own name.

In rejecting the report, Hébert said “we will keep our two training paths for nurses.”

Only one-third of Quebec’s 72,000 nurses have a university degree.

Hébert said his ministry will now carry out a detailed analysis on the requirements for both college- and university-trained nurses.

“We’ve never done such an exercise before,” said Hébert.

The goal, he added, would be to “determine what the required competences are, and how training programs can be modified.”
But Tremblay is having none of it.

“We don’t need another committee to tell us what we already know—that the Quebec healthcare system badly needs nurses with the science background and training required to deal with the complex situations they are being increasingly confronted with both inside and outside of hospital settings,” she said.

The director of McGill University’s Ingram School of Nursing agrees.

“(Hébert’s decision) is crazy,” said Dr. (PhD) Hélène Ezer. “On the hand he says we don’t have enough family doctors and nurse practitioners, and with the other he closes the door to university education that would make nurses far more effective.”

For Dr. Ezer (pronounced eezer), it is also unfair to put college-trained nurses into situations for which they are in no way prepared.

“This debate isn’t new,” she added. “We’ve been arguing about this for almost a century.”

Notably, Dr. Ezer blamed the failure to reform nursing education in Quebec on sexism and political inexperience.

“For sure the fact that nursing is a mostly female profession is a big reason why nothing gets done,” she said. “And maybe we aren’t as politically savvy as we should be.”

For her part, Tremblay vows to continue the fight for mandatory university education.

“We are back at the drawing board, looking at all our options,” she said. “We are not going to stop pushing for this. We are looking to the future (and) will assume our responsibility to help the 3,000 new nurses who come on line every year in Quebec be the best they can be.”