

Nurse's letter triggered investigation

DON THOMAS
Journal Staff Writer

Two Hills

A Two Hills Hospital nurse gave Health Minister Nancy Betkowski numerous examples of patient-care problems almost two years before the hospital board was fired by ministerial order.

The charges levelled by Ruth Cowan sparked secret investigations by the health department and Health Care Facilities Committee (HFRC) and led to an overhaul of procedures in the hospital's 60-bed long-term care unit.

Betkowski fired the wrong board, say Steve Serna, Shirley Kowalchuck and Don Schueler, newly-elected to the five-person board in October of 1989, just as the overhaul was being completed.

Cowan had charged that long-term staff repeatedly shoved a water hose down the throat of a patient who complained his bath water was too hot and ignored gangrene symptoms in a man who later lost his leg due to the infection.

She charged that a nursing supervisor ignored cancer symptoms in a patient who was later diagnosed with rectal cancer and died.

There were false or misleading entries on patient charts, failure to provide medications ordered by a doctor, inappropriate diets and little emphasis on recreation therapy, she said.

Cowan complained to Betkowski in a nine-page letter dated Feb. 14, 1989. She committed suicide March 31, 1989, after the hospital board discovered she had removed

patient records to back up her complaints of patient abuse.

Her death came about five weeks after a private meeting with two Health Department officials at which she provided confidential patient records, says her husband, Marvin, now living in London, Ont.

He said in an April 15, 1989, letter to Betkowski that his wife felt pressured after the board learned she had taken the records.

Betkowski's staff told her she was wrong to have taken them but that she should keep them to back up her complaints, he says.

After his wife's death Betkowski ordered an HFRC investigation in April. Marvin Cowan gave his wife's files, including confidential records, to chairman Molly Waring.

But he heard nothing further other than Betkowski's June letter saying that the board had developed an action plan, he says.

"She said she'd keep in touch with us, we'd have an open line to her . . . but everything she did was under the cover and she told me nothing. She wouldn't even answer my calls, she would give me to someone else," he says.

"There's a lot more behind this and I feel we were unjustly dealt with."

After the HFRC investigation the board hired an Edmonton nursing-care firm to overhaul long-term care procedures. Changes were being completed by Oct. 16, 1989 when a new board was elected.

Fired member Shirley Kowalchuk says Betkowski tried to muzzle the new board with an Oct. 23 letter saying there had been good progress in improving long-term care and in finding better management staff.

The letter warned the board "to avoid any precipitous actions" which would result in changing management staff or "interference with management responsibilities of the facility."

Giving the new board such a letter at their first meeting was an improper attempt to tie its hands, she says.