

Quebec students caught in middle of dispute

Province's pharmacy faculties face fallout of fight between government and pharmacists.
Written by Mark Cardwell on December 7, 2016 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca

Quebec's two pharmacy faculties have taken the unprecedented step of going public with their dismay over the fact that pharmacy students have become both pawns and victims in the acrimonious year-long battle between government and pharmacists in la belle province.

"We're in big trouble and we're very worried about the futures of our students and the profession," Jean Lefebvre, dean of the pharmacy faculty at Université Laval, told *Pharmacy Practice* this week.

According to Lefebvre, some 200 of the 1,000 pharmacists who had agreed to take on ULaval pharmacy student trainees beginning in January have informed the school that they will no longer do so over the past two weeks.

The current situation comprises internship positions and jeopardizes the future of the profession

He said the same situation has occurred at Quebec's only other pharmacy faculty at the Université de Montréal.

"We are all scrambling to find pharmacists to take on the students who have been affected," said Lefebvre.

He added that priority is being given to students in their fourth and final years of pharmacy studies.

The mass withdrawals began last week after the tabling of the final report of Bill 92.

Introduced by Quebec Health and Social Services Minister Dr. Gaétan Barrette in the National Assembly in Quebec City in April, Bill 92 – An Act to extend the powers of the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec and to amend various legislative provisions – carries amendments to various pieces of provincial legislation, including the Health Insurance Act, the Hospital Insurance Act, the Act respecting prescription drug insurance, the Act Respecting Administrative Justice, the Act respecting the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec (RAMQ) and the Act Respecting Health Services and Social Services.

Among other things, Bill 92 would notably allow Quebec's health insurance board, the RAMQ, to recover 15% of the non-authorized rebates, gratuities or other benefits extended by drug manufacturers and wholesalers.

Such benefits would result in fines ranging from \$2,500 to \$12,500 and/or penal or administrative penalties for both manufacturers and wholesalers who provide such benefits, and to pharmacists who receive them.

Amendments made last week to Bill 92 will require pharmacists to provide detailed billing so that patients can more easily compare prices.

The amendments threw more gas on the fire that has been raging between pharmacists and the government for 18 months.

It began with an agreement related to a 2015 piece of legislation, Bill 28, in which pharmacists agreed to \$400 million in professional fee cuts over three years in return for the removal the province's 15% cap on professional allowance payments during the same period.

Pharmacists later learned, however, that the agreement had been unilaterally modified by government.

The association that represents Quebec's 2,100 pharmacy owners, the AQPP, estimates those changes cost their members \$200 million in lost revenues and compensations.

In early 2016, the AQPP hired former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard to represent it in the case.

In April, it filed an official notice of dispute over the matter with the health minister.

It also made a veiled threat that it might recommend to its members to stop taking on apprentice pharmacy students.

Pharmacists are not paid for the training they give to some 1,000 Quebec pharmacy students each year.

In Quebec, pharmacy students must complete 40 weeks of on-the-job supervised training in order to graduate.

That unremunerated training is done throughout their four years of undergraduate study, and represents 25% of total training.

According to Lefebvre, students do some 350,000 hours of training in Quebec pharmacies annually.

In June, the AQPP also reacted angrily to the passage of Bill 81.

The bill seeks to reduce the cost of certain medications covered by the basic prescription drug insurance plan by allowing calls for tender.

The AQPP said the bill would also reduce the capacity of pharmacists to get professional allowances.

In September, the AQPP availed itself of its right under Quebec's professions code for dispute resolution to take its dispute over the cuts in professional allowance payments to the second stage: a request for binding arbitration.

Regardless of the outcome of that process, the AQPP says it will not solve the problem of Quebec pharmacists' payment model.

This week's public sortie by the province's two pharmacy faculties over the fallout from Bill 92 has led to more acrimonious exchanges between government and pharmacists.

"We find it shameful that pharmacists are making pharmacy students hostages," Julie White, the health minister's spokesperson, wrote in an email.

"Still, because pharmacists have undertaken legal action in our relations, we won't make any further comments other than to say we are open to discussions with the AQPP."

For her part, AQPP spokesperson Julie Gauthier denied that her association was encouraging pharmacists not to take on students.

"However, we understand that the capacity of pharmacist-owners to welcome (students) is reduced because of the hours that have been cut as a result of the government's various policies," she told journalists in Montreal.

In a joint statement, the AQPP and Quebec's two other main pharmacists' organizations—the ABCPQ and the APPSQ—blamed the government for the poisonous relations and the fallouts from it.

For their part, the province's two pharmacy faculties called for a speedy end to the standoff.

"The current situation comprises internship positions and jeopardizes the future of the profession," said Lefebvre.

"It's unfair to see students get caught up in this. But it's out of our hands. All we can do is to try to raise public awareness about the impact this dispute is having on us, and work to try and find places for the students who are affected."

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