

Libs' donnybrook with doctors spills over into halls of bureaucracy

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As the provincial Liberals wage their bitter battle with B.C. doctors, tempers are boiling over within the highest ranks of the bureaucracy.

The Gordon Campbell government confirmed yesterday that it has launched an internal investigation into a complaint from a veteran civil servant that he was choked by an assistant deputy minister of health following a stormy meeting about the doctors' dispute.

The bizarre incident occurred on Jan. 28 at the ministry's headquarters in downtown Victoria.

Senior research officer Mike Thomsen has filed a complaint with the Victoria Police Department alleging he was choked by Stephen Brown. Thomsen has also filed a complaint with the Workers Compensation Board.

According to incident-report documents,

Thomsen alleges he was grilled during an intense meeting with deputy health minister Penny Ballem about some research he'd done on the government's standoff with Nanaimo emergency room doctors.

Later, in another room in the building,

Thomsen alleges, he was approached by Brown, who accused him of not being a team player.

"The ADM came storming in ashen-faced and put his hands around my throat," the report of Thomsen's complaint says.

Victoria police Const. Rick Anthony confirmed the department is looking into the incident.

"It's in an investigation phase right now," said Anthony. "There was no visible injury. We're waiting to receive some instructions from the alleged victim on how he'd like to see this proceed."

Ministry spokeswoman Michelle Stewart confirmed that Ballem has ordered an internal investigation into the matter. The investigation will be conducted by a ministry staffer, who will interview witnesses, but New Democrat MLA Joy MacPhail said that's not good enough.

"This should be an independent investigation," MacPhail said. "I'm hearing from government workers all around the province that tensions are rising in the bureaucracy because cutbacks have created such a big workload."

The B.C. Government and Service Employees Union said the government is not taking the incident seriously enough.

"There's been no effort to separate the two people in the workplace," said union spokesman Mike Eso. Brown and Thomsen are both still on the job. Neither could be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, Ballem told a legislative committee on Monday that the now-resolved Nanaimo doctors' dispute could have been much worse.

"We were lucky . . . that nobody came to harm," Ballem said.

I presume she doesn't include her brawling senior staffers.