

Nortel disability advocate Peter Burns dies at 54

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Peter Burns was a vocal advocate supporting former Nortel employees' rights to long-term disability benefits. He died over the weekend at the age of 55. CBC

Peter Burns, a former Nortel engineer and key advocate in the struggle to secure benefits for the company's former workers, has died. He was 54.

The Kanata resident, who was on disability from Nortel before his benefits were cut off in January, suffered from complications of spinal cord surgery. He passed away on Saturday while on a weekend trip.

A cause of death has not yet been determined, but friends said there will be an autopsy.

Burns struggled through pain to fight for injustice after he and some 360 other Nortel workers lost disability coverage. Insurance they paid into failed to protect them when the company went broke.

His benefits dropped from around \$40,000 a year to about \$18,000.

"Nortel looks around and says, 'Who's the most voiceless group we can find? There's the disabled group. Take away their money,'" Burns said last month, speaking to CBC News.

'Peter would want us to continue'

"There's over a million people at risk of this kind of insurance. I think we have to really do something about it."

With the help of a cane and potent medication, Burns spoke out at news conferences on Parliament Hill several times. He met with opposition MPs who were proposing solutions.

Josee Marin, another former Nortel worker, said that the former workers will continue to fight for the benefits they feel they were owed.

"I don't want Peter's death to be in vain," Marin said. "I know Peter would want us to continue."

While at Nortel, Burns developed intellectual property that became a Nortel patent. Many of the company's patents are currently for sale, expecting to fetch close to a billion dollars.

Nortel's health and welfare trust needs \$80 million to restore benefits to disabled workers.

Burns is survived by three daughters, aged 16, 18 and 20.