

Code Hack: Health Innovation Hackathon

Role Co-founder, Lead Architect, Creative Director & MC Years 2019–2025 Website codehack.ca**650+**

Participants, volunteers, mentors, and partners

73.6 NPS

Post-event score — above "world class" threshold

594K

Digital campaign impressions for a weekend event (2025)

\$0

Island Health operating budget — fully externally funded

THE PROBLEM

Innovation was a strategic priority with no platform to act on it.

Island Health serves 850,000 residents and employs 30,000+ people. Innovation appeared in every org strategy. What was absent was any structured pathway for the people closest to care, including frontline staff, nurses, patients to surface, test, and advance ideas. No dedicated department. No process. No permission structure.

In my role as Director of Brand, Digital Engagement and Innovation, I identified the gap, built the case, and proposed a model. I pitched it to executive leadership and secured Chief Nursing Officer endorsement before the first event ran.

THE PROGRAM

A hackathon designed around inclusion, not technical skill.

Code Hack ran annually at Royal Jubilee Hospital over 24 hours. Participation was open to anyone. Patients joined as full team members, not advisors. Problems were pitched by participants, not assigned.

I built a colour-coded role system (Patient, Builder, Ally, Frontline, Designer) that ensured multidisciplinary team composition at the event level. No team could form without lived experience alongside technical and clinical expertise.

Winning teams received up to \$1,500 in prizes and six months of Innovation Lab support to continue their work with mentors and community partners.

I love the Code Hack tagline: 'Everyone is an innovator.' We need that now more than ever. Bringing diverse minds together is the way forward and experiencing the energy at Code Hack fills me with hope for the future.

Kathy MacNeil · President & CEO, Island Health, 2025

IDEAS IT PRODUCED — SELECTED PROTOTYPES

- **First Nations medication access** — Mobile AI app helping First Nations patients navigate pharmacy coverage through BC's Plan W; 2025 winner, led by a director from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre.
- **Hospital food waste** — System for redirecting excess food to discharged patients and community members at risk of malnutrition; 2025 People's Choice.
- **Fentanyl detection** — Discreet rapid-detection device built on existing strip technology; 2024.
- **Remote eye care and early diabetes detection** — Bluetooth kits enabling eye scans in remote communities, data routed to specialists; 2024.
- **Patient dignity** — Bedside hygiene solution centred on dignity as the design principle; 2023 first place and People's Choice; featured in Island Health Annual Report.

MY SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION

ORIGINATED

Conceived the model after co-winning a healthcare hackathon at UBC. Brought the pitch to Island Health, built executive alignment, and secured Chief Nursing Officer endorsement before the first event ran — with no existing template and no dedicated innovation function to support the work.

LED

Master of Ceremonies for all five events. Managed \$20K–\$30K in recurring annual sponsorship. Co-founded with Angela Wignall, now CEO of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of BC.

DESIGNED

Designed the full program model: open participation, patients as equals, participant-defined problems, and the colour-coded team role system. Also designed the brand and visual identity and built codehack.ca. Creative direction across all five events.

BUILT TO LAST

Created a post-event Innovators in Residence cohort providing six months of lab support for winning teams. As a founding leader, my goal was always to make myself unnecessary for operations. Code Hack completed its fifth year and continues under the Innovation Lab team after my departure in 2025.

COMMUNITY & SPONSORS

23 sponsors and partners across five years.

Code Hack started with zero budget and 100% goodwill. Over five events, more than 150 volunteers and 23 sponsors made it possible — spanning enterprise technology, government, academic institutions, and community organizations.

AWS · Bayer · BC Academic Health Science Network · BC Ministry of Health · CGI · Camosun Innovates · Circle Innovation · Doctors of BC · Fasken · Health Quality BC · Michael Smith Foundation · Mural · Nanaimo & District Hospital Foundation · Nurses & Nurse Practitioners of BC · Patient Voices Network · RT Prime · Semaphor · TELUS · TELUS Health · UVic Innovation Centre · Victoria Hospitals Foundation

RECOGNITION

Cited nationally. Featured in two annual reports.

Code Hack and the Innovation Lab were cited as a best-practice example in the **Government of Canada Nurse Retention Toolkit**, connecting frontline innovation programming directly to workforce sustainability.

The program appeared in **Island Health Annual Reports for 2023 and 2024**, both board-approved publications reviewed at the executive and governance level.

Island Health's President & CEO and board leadership publicly endorsed the program across its five-year run.

WHAT IT PROVED

Externally funded from day one

\$100K+ raised across five years from a cross-sector sponsor base. The event drew minimally from a departmental operating budget, unusual for a program of this scale inside a public health authority.

A pause isn't a finish

The pandemic shut Code Hack for two years. It returned in 2023 with more sponsors, more volunteers, and a 73.6 NPS, above the established "world class" threshold. The event was more resilient after the disruption than before it.

Nationally recognized, institutionally durable

Cited by the Government of Canada. Featured in board publications. Code Hack demonstrated that a credible innovation program can be built inside a regulated public system.