

HEALTH

Pathologist shortage could affect system

BY DEANA STOKES SULLIVAN

The Telegram

In a small room in the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's, Dr. Dan Fontaine uses his microscope to demonstrate how cancer cells can be detected in cervical, prostate and testicular cancer tests.

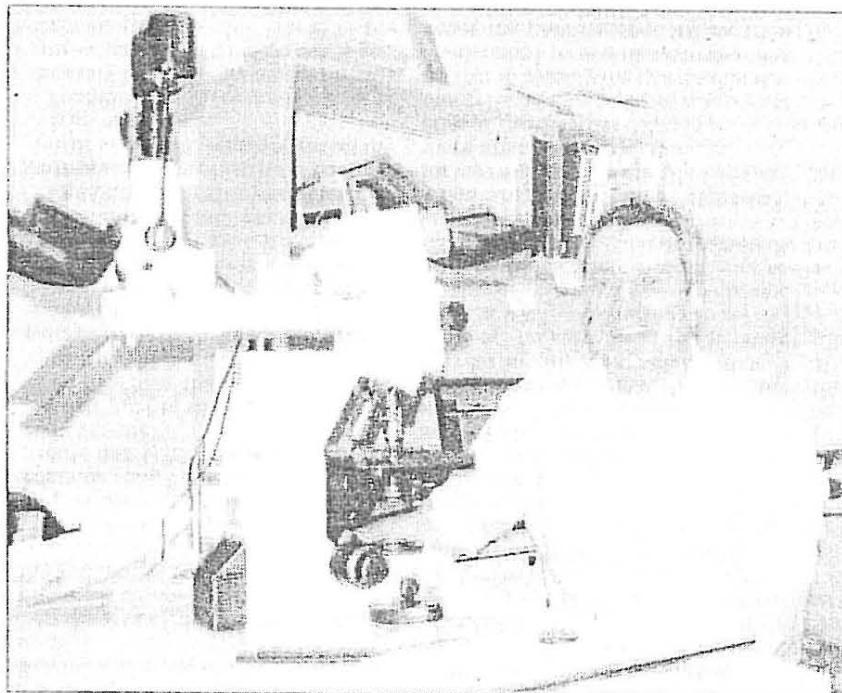
To the untrained eye, it's hard to tell the difference between normal cells and cancerous cells on the smears mounted on glass slides, but with a higher magnification and a bit of coaching, you can spot the changes. Instead of orderly cells, each with a clearly defined nucleus, the cancer cells appear rather disorderly and scattered.

Fontaine's work, as a staff pathologist with Eastern Health, involves poring over a lot of slides to aid medical specialists and surgeons in the diagnosis and treatment of patients.

Pathology is crucial for population health, but Fontaine worries about a looming crisis as older pathologists prepare to retire and few new medical students enter the field.

Shortages of medical specialists is not an uncommon problem in this province or across the country, but, Fontaine said, "the thing that's unique to pathology is that there are no new graduates coming into the program."

He's pretty certain he was the last Memorial University medical graduate to go into pathology. Fontaine



DEANA STOKES SULLIVAN/THE TELEGRAM

Dr. Dan Fontaine works in his St. John's office.

graduated from MUN in 1998 and moved to Halifax, where he spent five years completing further training and then returned to Newfoundland.

"I came back largely because I was married to a Newfoundlander," he said.

Newfoundland currently has only 29 pathologists, with more than half of them working in the St. John's area.

According to a 2004 National Physician Survey, one-third are over 55 years of age.

Fontaine said there are 11 pathologists on staff at the Health Sciences Centre and two positions are vacant. St. Clare's hospital has six pathologists.

See PATHOLOGISTS, page A2

Related story, page A3

Pathologists 'the backbone' of a lot of health services

Continued from page A1

Within the Eastern Health authority, Fontaine said, one pathologist will be leaving Oct. 17 for Alberta and another, who actually continued working two years post retirement, plans to retire in December.

A third pathologists in his 60s in-

tends to retire in the spring of 2006 and a fourth, who turns 65 in September 2006, will also be retiring.

Outside St. John's, it's not uncommon for pathologists to work alone, in solo practices, in towns such as Grand Falls-Windsor, Carbonear, Clarenville and St. Anthony.

To complicate matters further,

Fontaine said, there's a shortage of pathologists across the country, meaning hospitals in larger centres are always trying to recruit pathologists from Newfoundland and Labrador.

He's been approached himself with job offers from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and British Columbia.

In Ontario, there's such a shortage that some pathologists are still working in their 70s, Fontaine said.

Although he's not certain why pathology isn't a popular career choice among medical students, Fontaine said, he has noticed a lot of people don't know what a pathologist's job entails.

Many people think of autopsies when they hear the word pathologist, Fontaine said, whereas most of a pathologist's job involves laboratory work and diagnostics.

"We're trying to get that message out to medical students. I don't think we've done a very good job of selling ourselves in the past," Fontaine said.

The only autopsies performed by pathologists in hospitals involve deaths by natural causes to detect the origins of a disease.

Fontaine said there are not a lot of requests by family members for this type of autopsy and before one is performed, authorization has to be ob-

tained from the closest next of kin.

The provincial medical examiner is the pathologist who investigates suspicious deaths.

Fontaine said the pathologist shortage in this province "has the potential to be detrimental," especially since surgeons depend on them to determine the course of treatment for their patients.

A shortage of pathologists can change the management of patients, Fontaine said, and simply adding to the workload of pathologists isn't a practical solution.

"The last thing you want is to have an overworked pathologist," Fontaine said, because that's when errors can occur.

"If we don't get it right, then the other treating physicians don't have a chance," he said, "and the patient won't be well served ... you can get the best oncologist, but if you don't have a good pathology department, you're not going to have good outcomes. It just makes sense."

Fontaine said a cancer diagnosis, for example, isn't simple because there are a number of different varieties of cancer. After detecting cancerous cells, the pathologist has to test further to identify the type of cancer.

Advanced tests and more complex reporting provide for more accurate

diagnosis and improved methods of treatment, but at the same time the complexity of their jobs has significantly increased workloads for pathologists.

Dr. Bob Williams, vice-president of quality diagnostic and medical services with Eastern Health, agrees that the shortage of pathologists and upcoming retirements pose major concerns.

As chairman of a working subcommittee, Williams said he participated in a review of this issue and a report outlining these concerns has been submitted to the provincial government for consideration.

With the population in this province aging, the incidence of cancer is on the rise, Williams said, but people are also surviving longer with new and different cancer treatments.

As research yields more knowledge about various diseases, Williams said, more tests are needed in the lab to provide additional information to physicians. Therefore, the role of pathologists is becoming increasingly important.

"Pathologists are the backbone of a lot of the services we provide. Without them, some of these services are going to be implicated," Williams said. "It could have a big impact."

dss@thetelegram.com

Custom Order Now
Guaranteed Christmas Delivery



DECOR-REST Custom Made SUPERSTYLE

OSMOND'S FURNITURE
504 Water St.
753-8110 *In Business for Over 33 Years.*

Picture Surplus

Pathologists 'the backbone' of a lot of health services

Continued from page A1

Within the Eastern Health authority, Fontaine said, one pathologist will be leaving Oct. 17 for Alberta and another, who actually continued working two years post retirement, plans to retire in December.

A third pathologists in his 60s in-

tends to retire in the spring of 2006 and a fourth, who turns 65 in September 2006, will also be retiring.

Outside St. John's, it's not uncommon for pathologists to work alone. In solo practices, in towns such as Grand Falls-Windsor, Carbonear, Clarendville and St. Anthony.

To complicate matters further,

Fontaine said, there's a shortage of pathologists across the country, meaning hospitals in larger centres are always trying to recruit pathologists from Newfoundland and Labrador.

He's been approached himself with job offers from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and British Columbia.

In Ontario, there's such a shortage that some pathologists are still working in their 70s, Fontaine said.

Although he's not certain why pathology isn't a popular career choice among medical students, Fontaine said, he has noticed a lot of people don't know what a pathologist's job entails.

Many people think of autopsies when they hear the word pathologist, Fontaine said, whereas most of a pathologist's job involves laboratory work and diagnostics.

"We're trying to get that message out to medical students. I don't think we've done a very good job of selling ourselves in the past," Fontaine said.

The only autopsies performed by pathologists in hospitals involve deaths by natural causes to detect the origins of a disease.

Fontaine said there are not a lot of requests by family members for this type of autopsy and before one is performed, authorization has to be ob-

tained from the closest next of kin.

The provincial medical examiner is the pathologist who investigates suspicious deaths.

Fontaine said the pathologist shortage in this province "has the potential to be detrimental," especially since surgeons depend on them to determine the course of treatment for their patients.

A shortage of pathologists can change the management of patients, Fontaine said, and simply adding to the workload of pathologists isn't a practical solution.

"The last thing you want is to have an overworked pathologist," Fontaine said, because that's when errors can occur.

"If we don't get it right, then the other treating physicians don't have a chance," he said, "and the patient won't be well served ... you can get the best oncologist, but if you don't have a good pathology department, you're not going to have good outcomes. It just makes sense."

Fontaine said a cancer diagnosis, for example, isn't simple because there are a number of different varieties of cancer. After detecting cancerous cells, the pathologist has to test further to identify the type of cancer.

Advanced tests and more complex reporting provide for more accurate

diagnosis and improved methods of treatment, but at the same time the complexity of their jobs has significantly increased workloads for pathologists.

Dr. Bob Williams, vice-president of quality diagnostic and medical services with Eastern Health, agrees that the shortage of pathologists and upcoming retirements pose major concerns.

As chairman of a working subcommittee, Williams said he participated in a review of this issue and a report outlining these concerns has been submitted to the provincial government for consideration.

With the population in this province aging, the incidence of cancer is on the rise, Williams said, but people are also surviving longer with new and different cancer treatments.

As research yields more knowledge about various diseases, Williams said, more tests are needed in the lab to provide additional information to physicians. Therefore, the role of pathologists is becoming increasingly important.

"Pathologists are the backbone of a lot of the services we provide. Without them, some of these services are going to be implicated," Williams said. "It could have a big impact."

dss@thetelegram.com

Custom Order Now
Guaranteed Christmas Delivery



DECOR-REST - SUPERSTYLE

OSMOND'S FURNITURE

504 Water St.
753-8110 In Business for Over 33 Years.