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Product Summary:

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JEFF GILHOOLY: Last year Eastern Health said it had discovered a problem with a test that it gives to breast cancer patients. It meant that some women weren't getting drugs that might save their lives. More than 900 tests dating back to 1997 had to be redone and now, almost 18 months later, the health authority is talking about some of the results of that review. CBC's Mark Quinn, of course, has been following the story. He joins me now. Good morning, Mark.

MARK QUINN: Good morning, Jeff.

JEFF GILHOOLY: I guess we got to go back to the beginning here. What kind of test are we talking about?

MARK QUINN: Well I think it's important to point out that the test was given to everyone who has breast cancer. So it's not a diagnostic test. It's a test that's used to determine what kind of treatment someone will get once they have breast cancer and it's called a hormone receptor test. If the test comes back positive, it means the tumour has receptors for hormones. So it's actually fed by hormones. The hormones promote its growth. So if you have a positive tumour, then you want to give someone drugs that actually block the hormones from getting to the tumour and feeding it and making it grow. So in this case, what happened was we heard that there was one case of a woman who had a test that they first thought it was positive; turned out it was negative.

JEFF GILHOOLY: So what was the problem with the hormone test at Eastern Health then?

MARK QUINN: Well, in the Spring of 2005, Eastern Health realized that it was getting the wrong results for some of these tests and with that one patient, where they realized they had the wrong result, they did more retesting to see if, in fact, it was a bigger problem than that one patient. Eastern Health then decided to retest all negative samples dating back to 1997. And now, after 18 months, the Eastern Health said that it still can't say exactly what went wrong. I spoke yesterday with Dr. Oscar Howell and he's the Vice President of Medical Services and Diagnostics for Eastern Health. Here's what he said.

DR. OSCAR HOWELL: What happened? There isn't any one event there that we've been able

to identify or any one person that made a mistake that we can say there it is, just go in there and fix that and this will be taken care of.

JEFF GILHOOLY: Mark, what are the results of the review that Eastern Health carried out?

MARK QUINN: Well, Eastern Health is only speaking publicly now about the results. Officials say they have to be very careful because, as you know as we reported in the past, they are facing possibly a class action suit of this matter. It hasn't been certified, but it's in the works. They're looking to have it certified. What they are saying now is that the results of this review of the treatment of these people is that 117 women have had their treatment changed. So they reviewed all the charts, after they got back the results, and these women are now probably receiving drugs like tamoxifen which, as I explained, blocks the hormones that block the growth of tumours.

JEFF GILHOOLY: So 117 women had their treatments changed. That's, what, more than 10% of the 939 samples that were retested? Do we know how many tests, in total, were wrong?

MARK QUINN: No, and Eastern Health just isn't saying that. All they're saying right now is 117 women have had their treatment changed. You know, it could be more than that because we know of at least one instance where a woman has died since her test was done and found to be incorrect. She's initiated a lawsuit over this and she's since died since she initiated that lawsuit. Her family is pursuing it. But, you know, we can think of one case that we know of in the courts. There may be many other women, who have died since 1997, who had their tests reinterpreted since then.

JEFF GILHOOLY: What reaction is this getting from the Canadian Cancer Society?

MARK QUINN: Its members say they still have questions. I spoke with Peter Dawe. He's the Executive Director of the Canadian Cancer Society in this province.

PETER DAWE: What we're not seeing still is a full explanation of the numbers of people that were affected overall and some idea of what actually went wrong with the process. Knowing how many people actually ended up with the different treatment, because of the issue, tells you about the impact of what that issue had on a number of people. I guess what it doesn't tell you about is the actual scope of what went wrong.

JEFF GILHOOLY: What's being done to improve the accuracy of hormone receptor tests done by Eastern Health?

MARK QUINN: Well the lab has designated a group of technicians who will now be responsible for all of these tests. So they've got a small group of people who will be specifically doing these tests. They'll be given additional training and lab technicians are now interpreting samples before they are sent to Mount Sinai and then checking to see if they're interpretations match what Mount Sinai is finding. As well, as a further measure, samples are being sent to a lab in Europe to see what they are finding and matching that against what's being found here in Mount Sinai. I spoke with Dr. Carol Lange yesterday and here's what she said about that.

DR. CAROL LANGE: I truly believe that we now have one of the best labs in this country in terms of doing this test. As a clinician, I have to be convinced that the lab is doing as good a job as they can for my patients; and I am.

JEFF GILHOOLY: Okay. Mark, where are the tests being done now?

MARK QUINN: Well the tests are still being done in Ontario in the Mount Sinai Hospital, but Eastern Health expects that the tests will be done here again, in Newfoundland, early next year.

JEFF GILHOOLY: Okay. Alright. That's CBCs Mark Quinn. Thanks.

MARK QUINN: Thank you.

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