

## **THE LOOMING PATHOLOGY CRISIS IN NL**

### **What Pathologists Do...**

- Most people think that pathologists do nothing but conduct autopsies – this is incorrect. Autopsies make up a very small percentage of the workload of most Pathologists.
- Pathologists diagnose disease or lack thereof. Other physicians rely on the expertise and proficiency of pathologists when determining how to best treat their patients. Reduced access to pathology services could significantly impact patient wait times.
- Pathologists are playing an ever growing role in diagnosing and treating cancer patients.

### **The National Situation...**

- There is a shortage of pathologists across Canada – in the coming years, this shortage will become more acute.
- The average pathologist practicing in Canada today is over 55 years of age.
- It is estimated that the annual retirement rate for pathology is in excess of 5 per cent. The number of pathologists retiring in Canada is expected to continue to increase in the near term.
- At the present time, Canadian medical schools are not graduating sufficient numbers of pathologists to fill existing vacancies. Pathology has not been a popular specialty choice of Canadian medical graduates in recent times.
- To avert a large-scale crisis, Canada will need to increase the number of pathologists trained in Canada and recruit more international medical graduates (IMGs). As well, retaining these physicians will be critical.
- Most provinces are now aware of the significant supply issues related to pathology services. Many provinces are aggressively recruiting both within the country and internationally.
- Compounding the issue of an inadequate number of pathologists is the increasing complexity and evolving testing standards of pathology services. In general, today's sophisticated testing is able to provide more accurate diagnoses, but often this means that cases involve additional hands-on work, extra research and overall added time from the pathologist.

## **The Newfoundland and Labrador Situation...**

- Historically Newfoundland and Labrador has had 32 Pathology positions (30.1 FTE).
- Currently there are seven vacancies in the province (four in St. John's, one in each of Clarenville, Gander, and Grand Falls-Windsor). Further, there are two retirements anticipated this year along with two to four likely resignations.
- The province could realistically be at a staffing level of around 60 per cent of historical positions. When vacation and other leave are considered, the province could be in a very precarious position in the near term.
- Recent recruiting efforts have proven to be difficult and are not encouraging.
  - After an international competition last winter that generated some 16 applications, a number of offers were made to acceptable candidates. All of the offers, with one exception, were declined. The lone recruit started work in St. John's late last year.
  - All 16 applicants were IMGs. Most were American-trained pathologists with expiring J1 Visas requiring them to leave the USA. In declining their offers, most indicated that compensation was the major issue.
- As with many other specialties, Newfoundland and Labrador has relied on IMGs and pathologists with a strong connection to the province to meet our service needs.
- In the past, Newfoundland and Labrador was relatively attractive to IMGs for licensing and certification reasons. Many IMGs used this province as a stop-over to obtain full Canadian certification to allow them to practice elsewhere in the country. In recent years, other provinces have become more aggressive in their recruitment of IMGs. Many have introduced fast-track licensing processes and made it more conducive to obtain full certification.
- It has become increasingly difficult for Newfoundland and Labrador to recruit IMGs. Adequate and competitive compensation has become a much more critical factor in our recruiting efforts.
- In general, Newfoundland and Labrador offers the lowest pathology compensation in the country. Pathologists in this province earn between 50 to 90 per cent of what their colleagues can earn in other provinces.
- Ontario has recently conducted a review of laboratory services. As well, the provincial government and OMA have just concluded a lengthy negotiation and investigation related to pathology compensation. In December 2005, it was announced that Ontario Pathologists would be eligible for a minimum income guarantee of \$300,000 for the 2004-05 fiscal year. Similar guarantees with annual increases will be in place for 2005-06 and 2006-07.