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Subject: Globe and Mail story - Newfoundland held back faulty cancer data

Newfoundland held back faulty cancer data
At least 36 women who received false negatives have died
STEPHANIE PORTER

From Friday's Globe and Mail

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ST. JOHN'S — The government of Newfoundland and Labrador for two years has failed to fully disclose information regarding faulty breast-cancer testing that took place from 1997 to 2005.

Health Minister Ross Wiseman Thursday said the Eastern Health Authority took direction primarily from its lawyers.

"I think they should have approached it very differently in light of the importance of the information to the people affected and in light of the need for the general population of the province to have confidence in the system we have," Mr. Wiseman said.

At least 36 women who received false negatives from the flawed breast-cancer tests have died, according to a document signed this week by the province's deputy chief medical examiner, Charles Hutton.

Myrtle Lewis of Roddickton, Nfld., learned the harsh treatment she underwent for breast cancer might have been unnecessary. (Paul Daly for The Globe and Mail)

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Faulty tests cost women critical cancer treatment, court documents say
In addition, more than 300 women still alive were given false results and perhaps, as a consequence, not given access to the best treatment options for their cancer. Mr. Hutton's letter, dated May 16, was sent to lawyer Ches Crosbie, who is leading a potential class-action suit by survivors and families of the deceased against the regional health authority over the faulty testing.

The health authority would not comment on the case or the newly surfaced statistics, but it has scheduled a public media briefing for Friday at noon.

The new information has stirred tensions in the House of Assembly, with both the Liberal and NDP opposition parties calling for a judicial probe into what went wrong — it is unproven how many, if any, died as a result of the faulty testing — and why the full details of the retesting remained hidden for almost two years.

Premier Danny Williams told the legislature Thursday that the province, out of a "moral responsibility," would undertake a review to determine how more than 300 women received the wrong results from their hormone receptor tests from 1997 to 2005.

"We want to make sure that the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, but most importantly the people who are affected here — the patients, the people who have suffered, their families — they all need to know the answers," Mr. Williams said.

Events of the past few days have hit a nerve among breast-cancer patients, friends and family members,

who have already been on pins and needles for months.

Myrtle Lewis was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999. She underwent harsh chemotherapy and had both breasts and 11 lymph nodes removed within months.

Her breast-cancer tissue was among 1,000 samples sent to Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto for retesting in May, 2005. When the results came in months later, Ms. Lewis learned her radical surgery and chemotherapy might have been unnecessary.

"This has destroyed my whole life," she says from her home in Roddickton.

More than 40 breast-cancer patients have already signed on to take part in Mr. Crosbie's class action, which has yet to be certified. He also represents "a number" of families who have lost someone to the illness.

"Since news of the faulty test results broke in October, 2005, people have been fairly disturbed about this," Mr. Crosbie says. "Some people have been called in and been told their test results were wrong and offered a change in therapy. At the heart of the story are the outcomes of seven years' worth of estrogen and progesterone receptor testing, done at the laboratory at the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's, starting in 1997.

The tests, conducted on tissue samples from breast-cancer tumours, guide oncologists in determining the best therapy for the patient. A positive test result means the patient may respond to hormone therapies, such as the drug Tamoxifen. A negative test result means hormone therapy is not an option.

In May, 2005, after some discrepancies in test results were noted, the 1,000 tissue samples dating back to 1997 were sent to Mount Sinai for retesting. The public became aware of the retesting almost six months later, through media reports.

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