

**Question and Answer Briefing Note – Spring 2006**  
**Department of Health and Community Services**

**Title:** Retesting of Breast Cancer Patients (ER/PR)

**Issue:** Breast cancer patients are still looking for answers. Some patients may have missed out on a drug therapy (Tamoxifen) that lowers the risk of the cancer recurring. Some patients say it is hard to find out whether their results are right or not. The public is concerned that not all samples have been retested by Mount Sinai to date.

**Anticipated Questions:**

- Has the testing been completed on the samples sent to Mount Sinai?
- Has everyone been notified of the results?
- What has been done to correct this problem?

**Key Messages:**

- Health care is a priority for this Government and patient safety is first and foremost. The Department has been working closely with Eastern Health since last May when it was discovered that there was a problem with the testing of tissue samples for breast cancer patients with estrogen and progesterone (ER/PR).
- Testing of the tissue samples sent to Mount Sinai, for the most part, has been completed and the vast majority of results are back and in various stages of review by a panel of physicians who will interpret the results. We know this process is taking time but our primary concern is that the patients' needs are being addressed.
- A quality review began immediately when the problem was discovered. Eastern Health has had the method of testing for ER/PR receptors reviewed by external consultants. Their recommendations have been implemented and the consultants returned to Eastern Health in early April for an assessment of progress. It is expected that Eastern Health will begin testing of new patients in St. John's once the final consultants report has been received and reviewed, likely in late May.

**Other Suggested Response(s):**

- Until the external consultants review the testing process and assure Eastern Health it is safe to proceed, the testing of new breast cancer patients with ER/PR receptors will be done at Mount Sinai.
- Patient safety is a primary focus for our health system. Regional health authorities have embarked on a national Safer Health Care Now campaign to implement six targeted interventions in patient care, e.g. rapid response teams, prevention of adverse drug events, and improved care for heart attack patients.

**Background:**

- In May, the laboratory at the Health Sciences Centre discovered some inconsistent results in breast tumour samples. This happened when a patient who had tested ER (estrogen) and PR (progesterone) negative in 2002 on a DAKO system was retested on a new VANTANA system in 2005 and the test results were positive.
- Eastern Health has sent a total of 939 collected tissue samples from patients who had negative ER and PR results from 1997 to 2005 to Mount Sinai for retesting.
- About 350 breast cancer tests are done annually in this province. About 73% of all cancer patients tested positive for ER and PR. These patients are not impacted by the retesting. The retesting involves about 27% of all patients.
- Eastern Health has advised the public that information on the ER/PR retesting can be obtained by calling the Patient Relations Officer at 777-6500, or their surgeon, oncologist or family doctor.
- The laboratory problem at the Health Sciences Centre could be repeated across Canada. An expert in medical technology has publicly stated that Canada lacks a national standards body and labs across the country should take a look at what they are doing to make sure they get it right.

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