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To: Tansy Mundon
Date: 5/25/2007 12:00:42 PM
Subject: Re: Pathologists' raises not competitive enough, NDP claims

What time is issues and answers

Sent via Blackberry
Government of Newfoundland and Labrador

-----Original Message-----

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Pathologists' raises not competitive enough, NDP claims

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CBC News

Newfoundland and Labrador's plan to lure pathologists with a richer package will still leave the province far behind the Ontario job market, the New Democratic leader said Thursday.

Lorraine Michael said she was pleased to hear that stipends paid to pathologists will be increased to match the standard of other Atlantic provinces.

The government said it is taking action to help fill vacant pathology jobs at Eastern Health, which has been rocked by revelations of faulty hormone receptor tests involving hundreds of breast cancer patients.

Health Minister Ross Wiseman said the decision to increase remuneration for pathologists was unrelated to the faulty tests, which triggered a call earlier this week for a judicial inquiry and which are at the heart of an application being heard this week at Newfoundland Supreme Court to certify a class action lawsuit.

Michael told the legislature Thursday she has doubts about whether the extra payments will help fill vacant positions.

"Evidence here is that the pathologists that the labs are losing ... are going to Ontario," Michael said. "The province is competing with the whole of Canada, not just Atlantic Canada."

Michael noted that the maximum salary for a pathologist — a physician who analyzes laboratory samples — at Eastern Health will be \$241,000. However, the starting salary for a pathologist in Ontario, she said, is about \$330,000.

Wiseman said Newfoundland and Labrador cannot always keep pace with what he described as richer provinces, and that the province can offer things other than money to help with recruitment.

"In some cases, we're competitive on a national scale, but ... it would be very challenging for a province like Newfoundland and Labrador to always be able to say we have the best compensation package of any jurisdiction in the country," Wiseman told the house of assembly Thursday.

Michael, noting that four local residents in pathology were leaving for jobs in Ontario, remained skeptical.

"How does the tremendous package [the government is offering] make us competitive with the lowest-paid pathologists in Ontario?" she asked.

The controversy over hormone receptor tests has put more public attention on the heavy turnover of pathologists and technicians at the lab in St. John's, although Eastern Health has not commented on why more than 300 breast cancer patients came to receive false negatives.

Dr. Kara Laing, an oncologist practising in St. John's, said it is impossible to overstate the importance of pathology to her job.

"If diamonds are a girl's best friend, then a pathologist is an oncologist's best friend," Laing said.

Laing said she relies on pathologists to interpret test results and to determine what treatment is best for her patients. Laing said a chronic shortage of pathologists and a high turnover rate kept errors with the hormone receptor tests from being detected earlier.

"That's something that really needs to be brought out," said Laing, adding that the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association has been lobbying for a better compensation package for pathologists.