

From: Betty Donahue
To: Angela Bull
Date: 5/25/2007 12:18:36 PM
Subject: Letter for Consideration

Good morning Emilie,

Please find attached a letter to the editor in response to the article by Mr. Andre Picard regarding estrogen/progesterone testing at Eastern Health in Newfoundland and Labrador.

I realize that the length of this letter is longer than is generally accepted, but given the seriousness of the situation, I kindly ask that you consider printing it, even as a guest column perhaps.

If you have any concerns, please feel free to contact either our Communications Director, Tansy Mundon at 709-729-1377 or our Communications Manager, Tara Furlong at 709-729-2888.

Thank you,
Ross Wiseman

Dear Editor:

I write in response to the article in the May 24th issue of The Globe and Mail by Andre Picard regarding estrogen/progesterone (ER/PR) testing at the Eastern Regional Health Authority in Newfoundland and Labrador.

First and foremost, I extend my utmost concern to the individuals and families affected by the unfortunate situation regarding ER/PR testing at Eastern Health. However, it is unfortunate that this issue has been inaccurately reflected in some media reports which have only further led to this anxiety.

Our Government takes this situation very seriously and we are committed to finding answers for those individuals affected, their families and the general public. I would like to lay out a brief chronology of events which identifies the action taken by Eastern Health and our Government to address this situation and prevent it from reoccurring in the future.

Eastern Health first identified a problem with ER/PR testing in May 2005, following which a decision was made to suspend testing at Eastern Health and have 939 samples from the period of 1997 to 2005 retested at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. The decision was made in the interest of the patient, with a knowledge that if there was one patient who would benefit from having the samples retested and could benefit from hormonal therapy, it was important that this be done.

Eastern Health's first priority was the patients affected. There was full disclosure with patients and their families once test results became available, beginning in October 2005. Each patient affected by the test review was told directly, or through their family physician, one of three things: that their tissue had been retested and there was no change in the original results; that their tissue had been retested and Eastern Health was recommending a change in their treatment; or that there was a change from their original test result but no change in treatment was recommended.

Contrary to Mr. Picard's statement that information was only released publicly in December 2006, I direct him to media reports as far back as October 2005. Eastern Health publicly responded in an open and transparent manner to media inquiries on this issue and placed newspaper ads in local papers to notify individuals about the re-testing and to provide a number where those impacted could call for further information. Further, Eastern Health held a briefing for media in December 2006 to provide background on this issue and a detailed chronology. During this briefing, results of the re-testing were released, including the number of patients who required a different treatment regime - 117 women. However, one piece of information was not provided by Eastern Health at the time of the briefing - the number of women whose tests had changed but did not require a different treatment regime. Should Eastern Health have disclosed the fact that 317 patients test results converted from ER negative to ER positive, and that 117 required a different treatment regime? As a Minister in a

government that is committed to openness and transparency, I believe it should have been and would likely have avoided the confusion in the media in recent days over this issue.

Contrary to Mr. Picard's opinion, I have been nothing but forthcoming and transparent in dealing with this issue. It is inaccurate for him to imply that our government intentionally withheld information, as this is simply not true. It is also completely inaccurate for him to accuse Government or Eastern Health of putting anything else, including litigation, ahead of patient safety. Again, the concern of both Eastern Health and Government has been to ensure that patients and their families are informed of this issue and how it affects them, and to ensure that they received the appropriate treatment. The focus has always been on patient disclosure and ensuring that problems with testing are corrected.

On May 22, 2007, I announced there will be a Judicial Commission of Inquiry which will endeavor to understand what happened. The Commission will have a broad mandate with the authority to obtain any information necessary to ensure the public gets a full understanding of what actually took place with respect to the testing process for ER/PR in this province. In addition, the Commission has the authority to subpoena any individual it wishes, including politicians and administrators of the regional health authority.

Our Government is proceeding with an inquiry so that patients and their families can be assured that government takes this matter very seriously and that any questions they have are addressed in an open and transparent manner. The people of Newfoundland and Labrador will also have the opportunity to participate in this process by contacting the commission. As well, the final report will be publicly released.

It's true that there were cutbacks in health care by the previous Liberal administration in our province. However our government has strengthened our provincial health care system by increasing our health care budget in each of the last three years. This increased funding has enabled Eastern Health to implement a quality assurance program for ER/PR testing which consists of a new lab with new equipment and dedicated staff, including technologists and pathologists. This is an entirely new approach than existed in the past. Eastern Health has created a centre of excellence where we're able to pool our provincial resources of oncologists and pathologists to provide the expertise to ensure the highest standards of quality for the cancer care program. We have also invested significantly in the area of cancer prevention and treatment throughout the province.

In conclusion, I would welcome the opportunity to speak with Mr. Picard on this issue. While he has made the charge against government and Eastern Health that we didn't fully disclose all the information publicly, I believe providing misinformation to the public is a more serious issue.

Hon. Ross Wiseman, Minister
Department of Health and Community Services
Government of Newfoundland and Labrador