

Hansard – June 5, 2007

MS FOOTE: Mr. Speaker, today I received a letter from a constituent who writes to say: In 2001 I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and in February 2001 received radiation and tamoxifen. Could you direct me or tell me if all our samples were retested? I have not been contacted, but I think we should all have been contacted to reassure us. I am concerned, if the positives were not retested, how many of them could have been wrong. It is a concern to me. Was my treatment the right one?

Mr. Speaker, today I ask the minister, given the seriousness of this situation, and the uncertainty surrounding it for all women in this Province who have had breast cancer, I ask the Minister of Health: Why isn't it that all women who have breast cancer were not contacted to alleviate their fears if, in fact, they know that they have had breast cancer and at the end of the day they do not know whether or not they were positive or negative, or whether they are all being retested?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Mr. Speaker, as I have indicated in this House several times, and Eastern Health have communicated continuously on a public basis, in 2005, in July 2005, when they realized they had some difficulties with the ER/PR test procedures and the test results that were coming out, they, in fact, started a process to redo all of the negative tests. So, all of those tests that showed they were negative were redone, and they were all sent out of the Province for the retesting process.

As has been communicated by Eastern Health to members opposite and to the general public, in the fall of 2005, in October 2005, all of those individuals who were in that category were, in fact, contacted, whether their test results came back as having had a false negative, or that their treatment had changed, but that process of contacting all of those individuals who had their negative tests redone were contacted in the fall of 2005.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Grand Bank.

MS FOOTE: Mr. Speaker, I do not know what world the minister is living in, but I can tell him that there are women out there who had negative tests done who, in fact, some of them have not been contacted as of today.

Obviously, this lady had positive test results and she is still concerned because she is asking the question as well: How do I know if my results were the right results?

I am saying to the minister: Isn't it time that the Department of Health and Eastern Health, and any other health care board in this Province, get involved and look at both the positive results that were done as well as the negative ones, and let these people know.

Let's do away with the uncertainty. They are under a great deal of stress and they do need to know.

MS FOOTE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There are a lot of issues in health care in this Province, and what has happened with the faulty hormone receptor testing is but one of them. What is happening with the radiologists is certainly another, whether it is on the Burin Peninsula or now in Gander as we are hearing. Understaffing is another issue that was raised by medical professionals at this weekend's NLMA convention. We have already heard from nurses who are upset. The government stripped their sick leave and salary benefits. Now we hear directly from the medical association that similar wage and benefits issues are not helping the recruitment and retention of doctors. This has led to understaffing, and understaffing may have been one of the main factors leading to incorrect testing results.

I ask the minister: Why is your government willing to sit idly by and implement wage freezes and sick leave reductions while our health care system is bleeding its top professionals to the mainland?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Mr. Speaker, I have indicated in this House several times in the last couple of weeks, this Province today has the highest number of physicians that we have had in our history. In this Province today, we have one of the better nurse to population ratios that exist in this entire country. Each of our health authorities have had some degree of success in continuing to recruit physicians and continuing to recruit nurses.

This year Eastern Health, as I understand it - Eastern Health and one other authority, I think it was - have recruited a total of 160 new nurses in recent months. They have been able to convert some 200 casual nurses to permanent nurses, enhancing the schedule and enhancing the working conditions of nurses in this Province. I tabled in this House the other day a list of nurse positions that we have recruited in this Province. We have seen increases in the total overall percentage of nurses today versus when we formed government three years ago, I say, Mr. Speaker. So, each of our authorities have had some degree of success in recruiting nurses. The ability to able to recruit and retain -

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the hon. minister now to complete his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Recruitment and retention is always a significant issue for health authorities today, not only in this Province but right across the country. We are not unique in that set of

circumstances, I say, Mr. Speaker, but we have had some degree of success with that and we will continue to have successes. I indicated earlier -

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I remind the hon. minister of the protocol we follow, in that we attempt to keep our answers to one minute.

The Chair passes it back to the hon. Member for Grand Bank.

MS FOOTE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can only assume from the minister's answers that as far as he is concerned, the concerns that were raised at the NLMA convention this weekend were inaccurate. We are talking about doctors and nurses who are on the frontline, Minister. They know what is going on. I do not know what you are being told, but clearly, to talk about things like, it is better than ever, is not good enough. The fact of the matter is, there is a shortage in our Province and it is part of the issue, part of the problem, I think, why we are seeing the results that we are seeing today in our health care sector and why women today are faced with such uncertainty, and other people as well, with what is going on in terms of tests.

Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that there are a lot of problems in our health care system and the root of these problems can be directly traced to staffing shortages and the lack of state-of-the-art equipment. We have heard the minister's political answers, as we just did, in trying to blame everyone else but himself for these shortfalls.

I ask the minister: Are you and this government willing to take any responsibility for the problems that are currently plaguing our health care system?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Mr. Speaker, our government is prepared to take full credit for the investment we have made in health care in recent years. This past year, I think we had a 10.2 per cent increase in our Budget for health care, the second highest in this entire country, second only to Alberta. Last year, again, a ten-point-something percent increase in our health budget. We will take credit for that, I say, Mr. Speaker.

We have seen increases in the total overall percentage of social workers we have in this Province, an increase in the total overall number of physicians we have in this Province and an increase in the total overall number of nurses we have in this Province, since we formed government.

We will take credit also for the announcement we made in this year's Budget to build a new facility in Labrador City. We will take credit for having made the announcement to

redo the facility in Flower's Cove. We will take credit for what we are doing up in Grand Bank. We will take credit for the investment we are making in Clarendville. We will take credit for the investment we are making in Corner Brook.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the minister now to complete his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: We will take credit for the investment we are making in Grand Falls-Windsor. We will take credit for the investment we are making to Gander. We will take credit for all of those investments, I say, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair recognizes the Member for Grand Bank.

MS FOOTE: Mr. Speaker, talk about playing politics with our health care system and the people of this Province. This is not about taking credit, minister, this is about taking responsibility for your inaction.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MS FOOTE: The Minister of Health has been the Parliamentary Secretary of Health and the Minister since 2003. As we are now aware, many issues in our health care system were kept silent by this minister and are now finally becoming public.

I ask the Premier: Instead of using a deputy minister for a scapegoat, why are you not demanding the resignation of this minister who, obviously, cannot handle this health portfolio?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Let's make sure we understand what we are talking about here. The member opposite is contributing to the fearmongering that I have been alluding to in this House many times. One of the things, Mr. Speaker, we have is a quality program. All the members opposite need to do, if they are interested in finding out what happened this weekend - did the member opposite read the editorial in *The Telegram* this weekend? If you look at the editorial in *The Telegram* this weekend, I say, Mr. Speaker, look at what it says.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible).

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. WISEMAN: Look at what the editorial said this weekend. The editorial in *The Telegram* this weekend acknowledged that we have capable, competent people in our health system, providing quality programming and we have an excellent health system. We have dedicated and committed people in this Province. We have people who are making a difference in the lives of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. We have people in our system today who are making a difference in the quality of life for the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.

For the member opposite or anyone else to stand in this House and to try to suggest -

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

Again, the Chair asks the minister to follow protocol of the House.

The Chair recognizes the hon. the Member for Grand Bank.

MS FOOTE: Minister, it is not fearmongering when you get a letter from your constituent asking you: Where do I turn, because I cannot get the answers? I have not been contacted.

You can stand and take all the credit you want for who is in the health care system, but it is of no credit to you. You have been there since 2003, either as a Parliamentary Secretary or a minister, and what have you done? Absolutely nothing! It is time the Premier asked for your resignation instead of using a deputy minister as a scapegoat.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: In the absence of a question, she had an opportunity for a speech, so I guess I will get an opportunity for a speech as well.

Mr. Speaker, very clearly, at any given time in our history - if you look at today in 2007, if you look at when they were in government in the early 1900s, whether we go back to 1999 or 1991, or go back ten years or go back fifteen years or go back whenever, go back at any point in time, if you look at the history of health care in this Province, Mr. Speaker, there will always be times when there will be issues that are challenging for the moment. What becomes really important is not the challenge, is not the problem, but how the leadership in the Province provides a response, I say, Mr. Speaker.

In the cases before us now, what we have seen recently, is this government taking a very positive, very aggressive action -

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the minister to conclude his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

With respect to the ER-PR issue, look at what we are doing, Mr. Speaker. We are coming to grips with the issue. We have called for a Commission of Inquiry -

Hansard- June 6, 2007

MR. REID: Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Premier.

Mr. Speaker, in an effort to do damage control over government's mishandling of the ER/PR test results, Mr. Abbott was removed last week as Deputy Minister of Health.

I ask the Premier: What role did Mr. Abbott play in the ER/PR testing to justify his removal from that department?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: As I have indicated in this House many times in the last two to three weeks, this whole issue of the ER/PR testing at Eastern Health took place between - the period in question was from 1997 to 2005, and issues in and around what happened during that period, what were the causes, what were some of the issues that gave rise to those differences -

MR. REID: (Inaudible) John Abbott last week.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. WISEMAN: - and issues that give rise to what may have happened during that period, will be the subject of an inquiry. Mr. Speaker, we have announced a judicial inquiry. We announced there is going to be a very public process here. We are going to have a judge appointed to conduct an inquiry. It is going to be an open process, a very transparent process. That individual will have the power and authority to subpoena witnesses, to subpoena documentation and, at the end of the day when that individual produces a report, that report will be made public for all of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador -

MR. SPEAKER: I ask the minister now to complete his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: - and for the people in this House and anyone else who might have an interest. Everybody will know all of the answers in and around the issues pertaining to the ER/PR testing from 1997 to 2005.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. REID: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The minister just gave us a chronology of what happened since 1995, and never mentioned the deputy minister or why he was fired last week.

I will ask you again; maybe you can put your headphone in so you can hear me, because you obviously didn't.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. REID: I ask you or the Premier: What role did Mr. Abbott play in the ER/PR testing that caused you and the Premier to remove him from his position as deputy minister?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Mr. Speaker, I understood the question perfectly well. I heard the question very clearly.

Let me repeat it again, because obviously the member opposite did not hear my answer. I said, very clearly, and let me repeat, I said at that point, and I will repeat it again, we have announced a judicial commission of inquiry. That commissioner will conduct an open and transparent inquiry into any and all issues in and around the ER/PR testing between 1997 and 2005, and any issues coming from that in terms of who knew what, when, the flow of information, who took what action. Any and all of those questions, I say, Mr. Speaker, will be answered by this inquiry, and we will be announcing - I suspect the Premier will be announcing, in short order - the name of that person who will be the commissioner, the terms of reference for that inquiry -

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the minister now to complete his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said before, any and all answers with respect to that issue will be addressed during that inquiry, I say, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. REID: Mr. Speaker, I just hope that whoever does that inquiry does not have to ask this minister anything, because he might be twenty years before he gets an answer.

Again, not once did he mention why he fired, or the Premier fired, the deputy minister last week. If he is trying to make it sound, because he was involved in it, then I have to ask the minister the question: Why hasn't the Premier removed you? You were over there in the capacity as minister, or parliamentary secretary to the minister, all during this fiasco, so why are you still sitting there?

Mr. Speaker, in local newspapers around the Province today, Eastern Health are running full page ads to do damage control over how they handled the faulty ER/PR tests.

I ask the Premier: How can you justify allowing Eastern Health to spend thousands, and tens of thousands, of dollars on that type of propaganda when there are so many other health care needs that need to be addressed in the Province?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Let me correct two things in the member's preamble.

Number one, Mr. Abbott, the former Deputy Minister of Health and Community Services, was not fired. Mr. Abbott was provided an opportunity to move to another location, another department, as a deputy minister, I say, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Abbott, made the conscious decision himself that he would pursue a career in professional consulting, a personal practice that he had before coming with government.

The second thing, I say, Mr. Speaker, on which I will correct the member opposite, it is not Eastern Health going out and doing damage control. It is Eastern Health going out and straightening out the facts and the misrepresentation of facts imposed on the people of Newfoundland and Labrador by members opposite in the line of questioning in this House and their comments to the public, I say, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the hon. minister now to complete his answer.

MR. WISEMAN: So, it is very important - I continue to say in this House - it is important to understand the facts around this issue. It is important to understand the chronology around this issue.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the minister and all members to respect the general rule we have, the protocols of one minute.

The Chair recognizes the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. REID: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I guess what the minister is saying is that Mr. Abbott resigned as Deputy Minister of the Department of Health, just like I guess Ms Joan Cleary resigned from the Bull Arm Site. She was not fired either. You never even asked for her resignation, I suppose, did you? She tendered that.

Mr. Speaker, Eastern Health claims in this very ad that all - all - patients whose samples were being retested were notified. Now, the minister and the Premier know that statement is both false and misleading because they were not all notified, I say to the minister.

Now, last week the Premier dismissed the Deputy Minister of Health. Today, he is allowing Eastern Health to spend tens of thousands of dollars on propaganda, misleading information that they are putting out to the public.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I ask the member to put his question quickly.

MR. REID: I ask the Premier, Mr. Speaker: When is he going to do the hon. thing and not fire anybody else? He should ask for the resignation of the minister, the individual who is supposed to be responsible for what happened in his department. (Inaudible) the honourable thing and ask for his resignation?

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER WILLIAMS: Don't hold your breath, because you will suffocate, because this minister will not be asked to resign, I can tell you right now. Neither will the other ministers who were involved be contaminated with the kind of filth and the kind of smear that you want to put over everybody.

You have to stop playing politics here and you have to realize that this is a very serious matter. You can wave your ads and you can talk about propaganda and everything else, but this government is going to get to the bottom of these health problems, and we are going to go about it responsibly, but this minister will not be asked to resign.

This goes back to the 1990s when your crowd were in government. It goes all the way through the last period when you were a minister of the Cabinet, all the way through. So,

if there is going to be responsibility here, you be prepared to accept some responsibility as well.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The Chair recognizes the Member for Humber Valley.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!