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Newfoundland cancer lab produces false results

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A major cancer-testing laboratory in Newfoundland has produced unreliable results.

The lab is located at the General Hospital in the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's. It does the majority of cancer tests annually in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Eastern Health Authority said Wednesday all samples are now being sent to Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto.

According to the St. John's Telegram, the concern started in May when an initial test on a patient indicated that tumour cells were not cancerous. But after receiving new information on the patient's condition, the same sample was retested and showed a positive result.

Dr. Bob Williams, a vice-president of the health authority, says that as an added precaution results received as far back as 1997 also are being sent to Mount Sinai for retesting.

Williams said that 73 per cent of the tests performed in the past were positive, but the lab is mostly concerned with the 27 per cent of tests that were negative.

He said about 10 per cent of the tests performed over the past seven years may show conflicting results. The discrepancies were in tests for breast cancer. The authority receives seven or eight such samples each week.

The reason for the conflicting results is not known, but last year the facility brought in a new fully automated system for detecting hormone receptors in breast tissue. An older system required more steps in the testing process.

Williams said Eastern Health contacted other labs across the country, reviewed some literature and consulted oncologists and surgeons.

"After consultation it was determined that we should, in the interest of patient care, retest all patients who had tested negative".

Lab results from Mount Sinai are expected in about a month.

A quality review of the St. John's lab also is underway.