

HEALTH CARE: GYNECOLOGIC ONCOLOGISTS GARNER \$73,000 RAISE

Compromise on compensation persuades cancer doctors to stay put in Newfoundland

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The stakes were high, the time growing short, and the health care of 1,500 women hung in the balance.

Three cancer specialists in St. John's had said they couldn't continue to work without improved resources and pay. They tendered their resignations and prepared to leave, knowing full well their patients would have to travel for care.

There was some movement Friday, when the doctors were told Newfoundland and Labrador would meet a few of their concerns. But the province has been loath to consider a side deal giving these gynecologic oncologists more money, fearing a rush of similar demands.

That position changed abruptly yesterday with a personal call from Premier Danny Williams, who told them they were in line to receive a raise of about \$73,000 if they stayed.

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"It's like having moved a mountain," said Cathy Popadiuk, one of the doctors.

"We didn't get everything we wanted, but there's enough good faith that they will work through the issues."

The gynecologic oncologists agreed to stay, although it is unclear exactly how much money they will make under the new deal. Estimates from the doctors and the government range between \$350,000 and \$400,000.

"That doesn't make us the best-paid in the country," Dr. Popadiuk said. "We're still among the lowest."

But there was general praise yesterday for the government's willingness to compromise.

Gerry Rogers, one of Dr. Popadiuk's patients, said she was "incredibly relieved" to hear that the doctors would be staying. She also praised the "nobility" of Mr. Williams for changing his mind.

"I can't help but applaud the Premier for making this tough decision," she said. "He knows it's like stepping out into the abyss, setting a precedent like this."

The offer, which was also extended to pediatric and hematologic oncologists, gives these physicians the same raise that pathologists and medical and radiation oncologists received in the spring. That raise was one of the sticking points for the gynecologic oncologists.

The increase announced yesterday is retroactive to May 1, 2008, and applies to about a dozen physicians in total. As a result, there was immediate concern that offering a compensation deal outside the normal bargaining system will rankle physicians in other specialties who don't get a raise.

"It's a dangerous precedent, now, there's no doubt about that," Mr. Williams said at a news conference describing the deal. "But when you're talking in terms of patient health and safety and wellbeing and health care, then there's some times you just have to step up."

The Premier said they hoped to minimize the chance of a rush of new demands by calling for a four-month acceleration of contract talks with the provincial medical association.

"We wanted to come up with a solution that would put the other groups at ease," Mr. Williams said. "We're now able to say to other groups that, look, we're going to try to deal with this as quickly as possible."

The provincial government is now hoping to begin negotiations with the medical association as early as January, Mr. Williams said, instead of April as scheduled.

Along with Dr. Popadiuk, Patti Power and Lesa Dawson tendered their resignations in July.

They had painted a dire picture of their working conditions, saying they had to beg for instruments and operating room access. They were the only doctors with their specialty in the province, sharing cramped office quarters in the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's and covering each other's patients when needed.

The doctors practise one of the most specialized areas of cancer treatment, with only about 60 peers in Canada.

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