



The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada

La Société des gynécologues oncologues du Canada

LETTER SENT VIA EMAIL AND CANADA POST

August 29, 2008

The Honourable Ross Wiseman
Minister of Health and Community Services
Confederation Building, 1st Floor West Block
P.O. Box 8700
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

The Honourable Danny Williams
Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador
The Office of the Premier
Confederation Building, East Block
P.O. Box 8700
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

Dear Minister and Premier:

Re: The Resignation of Three Gynecologic Oncologists in Newfoundland and Labrador

The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada (GOC), on behalf of its 200 members across Canada, is writing to you to express our concern for the maintenance of gynecological cancer care in Newfoundland and Labrador, and to offer our help towards a positive resolution of the distressing situation. GOC is a national nonprofit specialty society made up of physicians who specialize in caring for women with gynecologic cancer. GOC's mandate is to ensure that Canadian women receive the highest possible standard of gynecologic cancer care by improving their care, raising the standards of practice in gynecologic oncology, and encouraging ongoing research in this specialty.

We are reaching out to you at this time because it is imperative that we work together to find a solution to this looming crisis. Newfoundland and Labrador must not lose its gynecologic cancer specialists; if this were to happen, hundreds of women in your province would suffer, experiencing first hand the negative impact of the discontinuation of the expert care they now receive. This is especially worrisome because women in your province have among the highest incidence and mortality rates for gynecologic cancers in Canada.

GOC may be able to help you. Based on information in the media, we believe we have additional information and data that will support your efforts to positively resolve this crisis, information about:
gynecologic cancers;
human resources; and
optimizing cancer treatments to get the best possible outcomes for our patients.

There is a critical shortage of gynecologic oncologists in Canada.

In fact, there are currently several vacant positions waiting to be filled. GOC's research suggests Canada will need 57 additional gynecologic oncologists by 2015 to deal with the growing burden of gynecologic cancers of an aging population. Yet we are currently educating only three to four Canadians per year to fill these positions. At this rate, Canada will experience a significant shortage of approximately 30 gyn oncologists by the year 2015.

For many years, Newfoundland and Labrador had only one gynecologic oncologist, a position that was occupied by four different doctors from 1982 to 2001. Newfoundland and Labrador is now in the enviable position of being able to secure the skills of three extremely well-trained, experienced and dedicated gynecologic oncologists. Their departure will leave a major void which will require years to rebuild to the current level of gynecologic oncology services.

Caring for women with gynecologic malignancies is very complex.

It is unrealistic to expect that obstetricians and gynecologists would -- *or could* -- take on the care of these patients. Medical literature demonstrates that when oncology care is delivered to cancer patients by subspecialty trained surgeons outcomes are optimized.

There is no slack elsewhere in the system to take on Newfoundland and Labrador patient load in gynecologic cancer.

Gynecologic oncologists in the rest of the country are already working to the maximum of their capacity as clearly demonstrated by the published wait times data in Ontario. Therefore it is both wishful thinking and impractical to think that other provinces can absorb the volume of patients from Newfoundland and Labrador. Air-lifting patients to other provinces is not a viable option -- medically or economically. A cursory cost analysis will no doubt indicate that this course of action will be far more costly for Newfoundland and Labrador than developing a plan to retain comprehensive gynecologic oncology care within the province.

Perhaps even more importantly, "outsourcing" this care would be a huge burden for the women and their families who are already struggling to cope. Losing these three specialists will only heighten their already high level of anxiety that surrounds a cancer diagnosis and treatment regimen. GOC sees no reason why these women should be disenfranchised from accessible, equitable medical care where they live, especially when it is within your ability to provide it.

We are confident that you believe – as we do – that the women of Newfoundland and Labrador deserve the best possible care when they are ill. We also believe that part of our jobs as medical professionals and health administrators is to – whenever possible -- provide necessary treatment in such a way that reduces stress and anxiety and supports patients and their families. The unavoidable reality is that dislocation of cancer care negates all our best efforts or intentions.

GOC urges immediate action on the part of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador to resolve this impending cancer care crisis in your province. The retention of comprehensive gynecologic oncology care within your provincial boundaries is essential. Newfoundland and Labrador currently has before it the opportunity to retain that specialist care by addressing the three concerns of the specialists in question. In doing so, you will be sending a strong signal to the women of Newfoundland and Labrador that their care is as important as other health care priorities, that this Government is listening and willing to take the steps necessary to give gynecologic cancer care the priority it requires. In the light of recent events regarding breast cancer diagnosis and treatment in Newfoundland and Labrador, we suggest that this would be a very welcome, reassuring and opportune announcement.

May we suggest that there is a significant opportunity here that awaits women of Newfoundland and Labrador as well as the Government and the gynecologic oncology group. There is an opportunity to leap frog beyond this crisis to create an alternative solution, the concept of the creation of a provincial fully integrated women's gynecological cancer program. This program would involve the integration of screening and preventive strategies as well as the therapeutic advancements that are necessary and integration of the palliative care services. At a practical level, it would involve integrating the gynecologic oncologists with the leaders in the public health and cervical cancer domains, the medical and radiation oncologists, and palliative care physicians as appropriate. Such a program is actually eminently doable in Newfoundland and Labrador because of its size, the centrality of its expertise and resources which are presently available. What is missing is a vision and the will to achieve such a 21st century model for integrated care deployment. The cost for this should not be prohibitive and could provide a platform to address many issues which may be potentially very difficult in the present impasse. In addition, this opportunity lends itself to lift this discussion from what seems to be a publicly played out confrontation to an empowering situation for the women of Newfoundland and Labrador. The GOC has experience in components of this concept and will be happy to provide a third party advice on this issue. It would be an exciting turn of events for such a program to occur even though it may be phased in over a period of time; in addition it would provide a lightning rod for the elevation of the care of the health services.

GOC offers its expert resources to you and your officials in the Ministry of Health should you have any questions about gynecologic oncology, human resource issues, or standards of care. Our priority is to identify a speedy solution to the current impasse; that is the only way Newfoundland and Labrador will be able to maintain an appropriate standard quality of gynecologic cancer care for women in your province.

Given the looming deadline of October 7th, I know you will agree that it is in the best interests of all concerned to move quickly. May we hear from you by Friday September 12th? GOC President Dr. Marie Plante is at your disposal, via email at marie.plante@crhdq.ulaval.ca or by phone at 1-800-561-2416 extension 250. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

The Officers of the Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada,



Marie Plante, MD, FRCSC
President, The Society of Gynecologic
Oncologists of Canada



Barry Rosen, MD, FRCSC
Past-President, The Society of Gynecologic
Oncologists of Canada



Michael Fung-Kee-Fung, M.B., BS, FRCSC
President-Elect, The Society of Gynecologic
Oncologists of Canada



Walter H. Gotlieb, MD, PhD
Secretary-Treasurer, The Society of
Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada

cc:

- The Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Health and the Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario

Newfoundland and Labrador Cabinet Ministers:

- The Honourable Paul Oram, Minister of Business
- The Honourable Joan Burke, Minister of Education
- The Honourable Charlene Johnson, Minister of Environment and Conservation
- The Honourable Tom Marshall, Q.C., Minister of Finance
- The Honourable Trevor Taylor, Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture
- The Honourable Shawn Skinner, Minister of Human Resources
- The Honourable Trevor Taylor, Minister of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development
- The Honourable Jerome P. Kennedy, Q.C., Minister of Justice
- The Honourable John Hickey, Minister of Labrador Affairs
- The Honourable Patty Pottle, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs
- The Honourable Dave Denine, Minister of Municipal
- The Honourable Kathy Dunderdale, Minister of Natural Resources
- The Honourable Clyde Jackman, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation
- The Honourable Dianne C. Whelan, Minister of Transportation and Works

Mission Statement of the Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada

The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada is a nonprofit organization consisting of physicians, nurses, scientists, pharmacists and other allied health care workers specializing in gynecologic oncology cancer care. Its purpose is to improve the care of women with gynecologic cancer, to raise standards of practice in gynecologic oncology and to encourage ongoing research. GOC also seeks to provide information and disseminate knowledge to practitioners, patients and the general public on gynecologic cancer as well as cooperate with other organizations interested in women's health care, oncology, and related fields.

Website: www.g-o-c.org