

Newfoundland and Labrador offers proposal to gynecological oncologists

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ST. JOHN'S — The Newfoundland and Labrador government announced a proposal Friday that appears to satisfy many of the requests of the province's only gynecological oncologists in a bid to prevent them from working elsewhere.

But while the province's offer looks satisfactory, one of the cancer specialists said she wants to know more about how the government's response will be implemented before she agrees to stay in Newfoundland.

Drs. Lesa Dawson, Catherine Popadiuk and Patti Power have said they would resign on Dec. 15 if their demands, which include boosting their salaries and resources, aren't addressed.

After a couple of days of discussions with the gynecological oncologists, Health Minister Ross Wiseman said he has approved additional office space, support staff and training – three of their key concerns.

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“Our desire here is to ensure that these three physicians stay with us,” Mr. Wiseman said at a news conference. “They provide a tremendous service to the women of Newfoundland and Labrador and they're dedicated, very capable and competent individuals who we'd love to have stay with us.”

Mr. Wiseman said their request for more money would be addressed later, though he declined to specify when.

“I'm not here today to talk about the financial arrangements that they might or might not want,” he said.

The gynecological oncologists are currently among the lowest paid in Canada. They want to be on par with their counterparts in Ontario, which would make them among the highest paid.

About 1,200 women across the province rely upon the gynecological oncologists for a range of services, including treatment and surgery. If they leave, those women face the prospect of having to fly out of the province to see other specialists for cervical, ovarian and uterine cancer.

Dr. Popadiuk said she wants a more detailed response from the government that outlines how and when it will come up with more office space and support staff.

“There are issues that have not been addressed with respect to the follow-through and the timeline,” Dr. Popadiuk said in an interview. “This all looks very good, but there are details that have not yet been addressed.”

In the interim, the province's largest health board is working on a contingency plan for reproductive cancer patients if the specialists leave.

The Eastern Health Authority has issued a plea to all of Canada's gynecological oncologists, asking if they would be available to accept their patients or come to the province to provide locum service.

“There could be gaps and there could be delays in treatment. That is the reality of the situation,” said Oscar Howell, Eastern Health's vice-president of medical services.

Dr. Howell said he has also spoken to some gynecological oncologists in the northeastern United States about whether they would be available to see Newfoundland's patients.

“Let me stress to you that this is all a fallback process, that we are still very, very hopeful that we will keep our own current three,” Dr. Howell said. “Am I worried about it? Absolutely.”

Some gynecologists and oncologists may be able to deliver some of the services normally done by the specialists, but they would only do so “within their ability,” Dr. Howell added.

It's estimated that 110 women in the province will be diagnosed with gynecological cancers this year, according to a 2008 report from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The mortality rate for cervical cancer in Newfoundland is twice that of the national average. *The Canadian Press*

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