

Short-term reprieve for N.L. gynecologic cancer patients

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Newfoundland and Labrador's three oncologists who treat gynecological cancers have agreed to stay in the province until December, although one has cast doubts about talks to prevent their departure.

The specialists Lesa Dawson, Cathy Popadiuk and Patti Power served notice this summer they would resign Oct. 7 if measures were not taken to improve the services they can provide to their patients.

Attending a fundraising walk for ovarian cancer patients in St. John's on Sunday, Popadiuk said the doctors have now agreed to continue treating patients until Dec. 15, in part because it has taken longer than expected to put together a database of patients needing to be notified.

"To be fair to the patients that we currently have, we want to give them three months notice personally, in a letter, so that's why we extended the time before we resign," Popadiuk said.

Popadiuk and her colleagues have argued that they do not have the resources and supports needed to give their thousands of patients the same standard of care they would receive elsewhere in the country.

The three gynecologic oncologists are also paid less than colleagues across Canada, and significantly less than other oncologists in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Popadiuk said Eastern Health, the regional authority that employs all of them, is addressing some of their concerns, although she added that some key questions have not yet been addressed. She said it is really up to Premier Danny Williams and Health Minister Ross Wiseman to find a solution.

"We just haven't heard anything from the decision-makers who tell [officials at Eastern Health and] the Department of Health and Community Services what to do," Popadiuk said.

Meanwhile, the gynecologic oncologists will stop taking new patients after Sept. 16.

Wiseman sparked a controversy in July when he said the government was prepared, if necessary, to fly cancer patients to other jurisdictions for treatment.

Bette Winsor, who was diagnosed three years ago with ovarian cancer and was one of about 100 people who gathered in a St. John's park for Sunday's fundraiser, said she will need to see an oncologist for years to come.

"I feel very depressed about it, because my care won't be the same. My family doctor is a wonderful doctor, but she's not an oncologist," Winsor said.

"Where will I go if I get sick again?"

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at 10:32 PM ET Several weeks ago we were informed that the minister of health was "working on" the problem of retaining the three oncologists. I'm glad to know that in a medical emergency, nurses and doctors would not be this slow to "work on" resuscitating a patient. Since that vague announcement was made, there has been a thunderous silence emanating from the minister's office. Oh well, I guess this silence is preferable to the usual meaningless twaddle we get whenever the minister opens his mouth.

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at 11:15 AM ET This is not the first time we have heard of the Government solution of "flying" patients to care elsewhere. Wouldn't it be just as cheaper or cheaper to increase the salaries and resources of the various doctors and staff and keep the patients here? Certainly it would be easier on the patients and their families as well.

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at 10:50 AM ET The problem isn't just these three individuals and their particular specialty. It's all specialists. Recruiting quality physicians and other medical staff depends on them being able to carry out a reasonable plan of care. What physician of any type wants to work in a province where s/he has to juggle the care her/his patient needs with the plan they have to build around a lack of equipment and specialists?

One off agreements were a mistake in the beginning and putting off a general negotiation with physicians on principle is also a mistake.

Other contracts are amended when circumstances change. Why not be pro-active, sit down now, and work out a deal that includes everyone? Yukon just signed a four-year agreement with their people -- and that's of real interest to those of us who live in Labrador and are even more challenged to find and retain good family doctors, much less specialists.

Even if you make the remaining specialists wait for their new agreement to come into effect, it would certainly be reassuring to them to know what their future will hold and perhaps it would also stop this slow bleed in our health care system.

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at 10:40 AM ET first the unsettling news about the breast cancer tests, and now three experts in their field leaving the province and the government is not listening to what they need to be able to stay here.

what kind of concern does the government have for women's health?

not much, by the looks of it...

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