

HEALTH CARE: NEWFOUNDLAND

Doctors who resigned struggle with health authority for patient list

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Three medical specialists who have resigned and planned to leave St. John's next month find themselves in limbo because of the health authority's seeming inability to generate a complete list of their patients.

The gynecologic oncologists don't want to leave without giving proper notice to each person under their care, explained Rob Ritter, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association, but they say Eastern Health has not given them the data they need to do that.

"I don't know what's behind it, there may have been technical problems," Mr. Ritter said. "I don't know and I don't want to speculate."

This is not the first time Eastern Health, the largest health authority in the province, has struggled to manage its databases. Last year, the agency was initially unclear over how many procedures were done by a radiologist whose work had been called into question. And it received a torrent of criticism after a letter of apology - part of a batch sent to women who may have been affected by faulty breast-cancer testing - was sent to a deceased patient.

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Signs of new problems provoked a flurry of criticism and concern.

"It seems that Eastern Health does have some serious resource issues," said Leslie MacLeod, president of the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women. "Any other medical practitioner ... will say 'something is wrong here.' This is a really awful situation all around."

Lack of resources was one of the reasons cited for the resignations of doctors Lesa Dawson, Cathy Popadiuk and Patti Power. They did not talk publicly yesterday about their decision, allowing Mr. Ritter to speak on their behalf.

A spokeswoman for Eastern Health was unable to arrange an interview with someone who could explain the six-week delay in coming up with the list. She said in a statement that the health authority was in the process of working with the physicians to prepare "the most comprehensive list" possible.

Jim Bentley, a physician at Halifax's Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre who trained in gynecologic oncology, said there is no one-size-fits-all approach to database management in the medical profession. But he added that this sort of delay would not be likely at his

institution.

"I could find out fairly instantaneously all the patients I've seen in the last six months," he said yesterday. "I can't quite fathom why they couldn't do it."

The three gynecologic oncologists in St. John's, members of a field so specialized that it is practised by only about 60 people across Canada, submitted resignations in late July.

They were to leave early next month but have now pushed their departure date to December.

The doctors blame working conditions, lack of resources and earnings as much as \$200,000 lower than their counterparts in some other provinces for their decision to leave. The government says it is open to discussing most of their issues but has ruled out a side deal affecting the pay of only these specialists.

They are the only doctors in the province performing the specialty, and their absence would cause enormous hardship, leaving about 1,500 patients in the lurch.

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