

## LOCAL NEWS

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# Specialists' departure could hurt med school

Health minister says government committed to resolution

BY NADYA BELL  
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Memorial University's medical school will not be able to train obstetricians and gynecologists if the province's women's cancer specialists follow through on their resignation, on Oct. 7, 2008.

The effect on training new doctors is only one issue raised by the medical association and the NDP, illustrating how important the province's three gynecologic oncologists are for medical care.

Health Minister Ross Wiseman says the provincial government is committed to dealing with the patient safety issues, and he hopes the specialists can wait for a salary raise until after formal contract talks next year.

Dr. Terry O'Grady, the chair of the obstetrics and gynecology school at MUN says if it is not able to teach gynecologic oncology, the residence program will no longer be accredited by the Royal College of Physicians.

"We are a small school with a small volume, and because we are just getting the deliveries that we need, if we have another hit where we cannot provide gyne-oncology training, then we may indeed lose our residency program," O'Grady says.

The specialists and residents train the undergraduate medical students in gynecology and obstetrics, so she says losing three out of their 10 faculty members and all of their residents from the school would have dire implications.

"This is something that is important in the medical school curriculum for undergraduate students, no matter what part of medicine they end up in," she says.

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Dr. Elizabeth Callahan, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA) says the departure of the specialists will leave a huge void in the medical system that will be difficult to fill.

The gynecologic oncologists submitted a report to the NLMA March 11, outlining problems in their department and asking for more resources and a competitive salary. The report states the specialists are the worst paid in the country by a large margin.

"The things that they're asking for are not out to lunch things. They're support staff, having a secretary, having an office space big enough to adequately look after your patients, having adequate OR time, being able to do surgeries that you need to do, being able to do the newer up-to-date methods of surgery and looking after your patients," Callahan says.

"I think the medical community in general is very much in agreement with the fact that something has to be done," Callahan said.

Health Minister Ross Wiseman says since he became aware of the issues with gynecologic oncology on June 6, the government has been working for a resolution.

"We made a commitment that we want to work with them and bring about those changes and we will do that over a period of time," he says.

"On the issue of compensation, seven short months from now we will be sitting down at the table to negotiate an agreement with them, and the rest of their colleagues in the province. We will have a new arrangement with new enhanced compensation for all physicians at that time."

The NLMA say it hopes to open contract talks with the provincial government in April, 2009.

Wiseman says the NLMA, which had the specialists' report in March, should have spoken up about gynecologic oncology at a May meeting when they discussed pathology and medical and radiation oncology issues.

"They had that internal work, they should have shared it with us when we met earlier in the spring. And if they had that report in their possession, why would they say to the premier and I that there's no other group out there, nobody else in this dire situation, as pathologists and medical and radiation oncologists are," Wiseman says.

"If they thought that this was crucial, they should have raised it at that point as well."

The announced resignations has caused much anxiety for cancer patients and survivors, one breast cancer survivor says.

The woman did not want to disclose her name out of respect for her personal doctor.

"I think they're ticking the general public off with their tactics," she says of the doctors. "A lot of patients are fed with the way it's going in the media."

She says she hopes the doctors can wait until the formal contract talks to resolve their issues.

The specialists have been receiving letters of support, as well as job offers from other hospitals across Canada, Callahan says.

If the gynecologic oncologists leave, Eastern Health will likely not be able to recruit new specialists to fill the positions, because there are only 50 other specialists in Canada, and only three doctors will be graduating into the profession this year, Callahan says.

The specialists' problems illustrate how the health-care system needs a complete review, NDP Leader Lorraine Michael says. Women's health is at stake, Michael says, as Newfoundland's aging female population is requiring more cancer treatment, and survival rates for women will be far better if the specialists stay in the province.

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