

LOCAL NEWS

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'We need these people' 🚗

Ovarian cancer survivor says travelling for treatment difficult

BY NADYA BELL

The Telegram

Emir Andrews says she is very worried that women with cancer in Newfoundland today will not get medical treatment as good as she had when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer six years ago.

Andrews' doctor is one of three gynecologic oncologists who have submitted their resignations and say they will leave the hospital at the end of November if there is no formal agreement to resolve multiple issues in their department.

Andrews says the treatment she received from gynecologic oncologist Dr. Cathy Popadiuk likely saved her life.

"If my ovarian cancer had not been caught as quickly as she caught it, there is a very distinct probability that I might not be here now. And having a specialist here who caught that when she did, I probably owe her my life," Andrews said.

"I think it is critical service for women. We know ovarian cancer is a killer, I was extremely lucky that mine was caught when it was still encapsulated and had not spread," she said.

Health Minister Ross Wiseman has said that if the specialists leave and Eastern Health is not able to recruit replacements, it will fly patients to other parts of the country for treatment.

But Andrews, who has had multiple sclerosis for 25 years and uses a motorized chair, says travelling to another province for her ovarian cancer treatment — involving visits to see Dr. Popadiuk every three months for five years — would have been very difficult.

"There may be women out there who do not know they have cancer, but at least they have specialists here in town they can see quickly. More quickly than being told, 'OK we have to ship you off,' however long that takes to set up, and organize and get them there," Andrews said.

Dr. Patti Power, one of the three specialists, spoke out publicly on Thursday for the first time about their issues. The doctors have tendered their resignations for Oct. 7, but Power says they may extend their stay to give the patients three months advance notice before they leave.

Power says they have a meeting scheduled in the next few weeks with the health minister to discuss their issues. She hopes they can resolve the problems, but says the issues are complex, and it won't be easy.

"We are still hopeful that we can come to some sort of resolution. But when we came to this very difficult decision, we all committed at that time, that it's time to move on," she said.

"We've had frustrations delivering standards of care. We've had frustrations advancing our skills. We've had frustrations moving our academic careers forward. So in terms of our plan from here, likely we'll all move on to different centres, treating other women with gynecological cancers."

Some of their chemotherapy treatments go on for many months and there are several courses of treatment that they must do, Power said. "For ovarian cancer patients, their treatments may go on for years and years. So flying patients out is not going to be a practical solution, and I don't think it's a humane solution."

One of the specialists' problems has been the lack of a gynecologic pathologist specifically trained in diagnosing the kind of cancers their patients have. Power says there are often inconsistencies between the pathology reports and their view of a patient's illness as surgeons.

"There have been many issues over the years so really to offer the patients the best possible care, we need to recruit a gynecopathologist or have access to those resources," she said.

While the lack of a qualified pathologist is an important issue, Power says there are many other equally serious problems, like their inability to offer women standard treatments for their cancer.

"Newfoundland has the highest rate of cervical cancer in the country, and more women die of cervical cancer in this province than any other province in Canada. Because of a lack of resources, a lack of funding, a lack of nurses, lack of space and a lack of beds in the medical care chemotherapy unit, we can't offer these clinical trials to patients," she says.

A formal commitment from the government and Eastern Health to resolve all of the issues in the long term is what Power says the

specialists would like to see if the government is serious about wanting them to stay in the province.

"Women who come to our centre should expect to be treated with the same standard of care as a woman who walks into a cancer centre in Ontario. They deserve it. We all deserve it," Power said.

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