



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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April 16, 2008

The Honorable Danny Williams
Premier, Newfoundland and Labrador
8th Floor, East Block
Confederation Building
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

Dear Premier:

The NLMA Board of Directors met last weekend and as you can well imagine our deliberations were dominated by the Commission of Inquiry into Hormone Receptor Testing that is currently under way. We spent a great deal of time reflecting on the unfolding situation and contemplating its future implications. Clinical leaders representing both oncology and pathology services were invited to brief our Board so that we might acquire a first-hand impression of how things are on the front lines. The primary purpose of this letter is to share information and our perspective during these very difficult times. We do so with the hope that this will be of some assistance to you in addressing the extraordinarily difficult and complex issues that loom on the horizon.

Before conveying some of the specifics that were discussed at our meeting, it will be helpful to provide you with some context on the general disposition of the NLMA with respect to the issues we currently face. As well, it is important to state at the outset that while we may not necessarily see eye-to-eye on all points, we undoubtedly share the common goal of restoring public confidence in our health care system and re-establishing a sense of normalcy.

Members of the NLMA understand and support the need for the Commission of Inquiry to examine, in depth, the circumstances that led to the very unfortunate state of affairs around breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. We are confident that this process will enable Commissioner Cameron to fulfill her mandate and help restore public trust in our health care system. Because these proceedings are inherently methodical and slow, it is unlikely that the Commission will complete its work before the summer at the earliest. In the meantime, there are issues within the pathology and oncology services that cannot wait and require immediate attention.

Physicians, especially pathologists and oncologists, are not immune to the same emotional trauma and anguish that has cast its shadow over the affected patients, their families and the public at large. Ironically, they have been restrained from expressing the kind of remorse and sympathy that they would normally be inclined to offer all their patients because of the legal uncertainties that loom ahead. There is also a growing frustration because they feel that the public does not have the complete picture and are consequently judging physicians unfairly. Hopefully, they will have an opportunity to better inform the public when they go before the Commission of Inquiry and that will help somewhat.

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Representing and supporting physicians in Newfoundland and Labrador and providing leadership in the promotion of good health and the provision of quality health care to the people of the province

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In the meantime, there are additional factors at play that give rise for concern and warrant immediate attention. Both the pathology and oncology groups have been working well beyond normal limits (between 30 to 50 per cent) for a very long time and this has, in and of itself, created a pressure-cooker environment with the associated stresses. The situation has been further exacerbated by all of the remedial disclosure work that has been generated and the extra time needed to reassure anxious patients about the care they are receiving. To make matters worse, there have been two resignations (one pathologist and one oncologist) last week, with the possibility of more to follow. It is not an exaggeration to state that the situation is very precarious. While future recruiting is vitally important, as you have correctly indicated to the media, retention is now the most pressing need and requires immediate attention.

As important as it is to restore public confidence, we need to do the same thing for physicians. In fact, the two elements are inextricably linked. The NLMA has given this matter a great deal of thought and would like offer some constructive suggestions to help redirect the prevailing skepticism to a more optimistic direction.

If there ever was a time to galvanize our efforts beyond partisan interests, it is now. The challenges are enormous but surmountable, providing we apply our collective energies on fixing the future rather than dwelling on blame over the past. The NLMA is willing and anxious to work cohesively with government, under your overarching leadership, in the effort to offer a brighter vision. To that end, we would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss how we might move forward.

Yours truly,



Dr. Joseph Tumilty, MD, FRCSC
President



Dr. Elizabeth Callahan, MD, CCFP, FCFP
President Elect



Robert Ritter
Executive Director