

HEALTH

Breast-cancer testing suspended

New and old samples to be sent to Toronto pending review

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Until a quality review is completed, the Eastern Health authority is sending all tissue samples from breast cancer patients out of the province for testing at Mount Sinai hospital in Toronto.

Dr. Bob Williams, vice-president of quality diagnostic and medical services with Eastern Health, said this decision was made after new information became available concerning a patient in May.

In an initial test to determine if the patient's tumour and tumour cells could be stimulated by the hormones estrogen and progesterone, the result was negative. But retesting of the same tissue sample, after new information became available about the patient, showed a positive result.

Williams said as a result of this finding, the health authority has decided to suspend all testing of breast cancer patients locally and instead is sending the seven to eight tissue samples taken each week to Mount Sinai for testing until a full quality review is completed in that particular section of the lab.

As an added precaution, tissue samples collected as far back as 1997 are also being sent to Mount Sinai for retesting.

All lab results from Mount Sinai are expected to be received within the next few weeks or a month, Williams said.

Estrogen and progesterone receptors are one of many factors considered when deciding how each patient's cancer is treated.

Williams said surgery is the main treatment for a cancer tumour, but other treatments can vary. Patients testing positive for hormone receptors, for example, may be offered the drug Tamoxifen, which is an agent that interferes with the action of estrogen and progesterone on the tissue.

Testing for estrogen and progesterone receptors was introduced in Europe in the mid-1990s and has been available in North America since about 1997.

Williams said the receptors are markers in the nucleus of cells that determine whether that particular cell is receptive or stimulated by estrogen or progesterone.

About 350 of the tests are done annually in this province, with 60 per cent of

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the samples from Eastern Health authority patients and 40 per cent from patients treated at other regional centres.

Williams said the lab at the General Hospital in the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's stains the specimens for these particular receptors and the results are read at the referring hospitals.

Most of the tests performed were pos-

itive, Williams said.

"We had about 73 per cent of tests that were positive, so we're only retesting the the 27 per cent or so that were negative."

And from the early results, Williams said, it appears only about 10 per cent of the overall tests performed over the past seven years show different results.

Patients are not required to undergo further testing because tissue specimens are kept in the lab for 20 years after initial testing.

Williams said retesting is not uncommon when additional information becomes available about a patient or through new research.

The reason for the discrepancy in the breast tissue results isn't clear, but last year Eastern Health implemented a new fully automated system for detecting hormone receptors in breast tissue.

Williams said the older system was semi-automated and the testing involved multiple steps, including boiling or microwaving specimens to "tease out the antigen from the nucleus of the cell so the staining would be taken up by the antigen if there are receptors there."

It was the new automated system that

yielded conflicting results on retesting.

Williams said Eastern Health contacted other labs across the country, reviewed some literature and consulted with oncologists and surgeons with expertise in this area.

"After consultation and a review of our results with them, it was determined that we should, in the interest of patient care, retest all patients who had tested negative for these particular receptors back to 1997," Williams said.

Mount Sinai was chosen because of its good international reputation. Williams said, although the lab there is already busy, "They're working on maximum capacity, working overtime for us."

"We want to make sure if there's a patient out there who could benefit by some change in therapy, that we identify those patients as soon as we can and provide them with any additional or different therapy if that's indicated," Williams said.

"We felt it warranted further review."

The quality review is expected to provide recommendations for future testing of breast tissue samples in the Eastern Health authority's labs.

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