

Inadequate response to lab warning, pathologist says

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A pathologist who warned health authorities in St. John's about flawed cancer tests four years ago said he could not trust laboratory results, told CBC News this week that he was not satisfied with how officials immediately responded.

Gershon Ejeckam wrote an internal memo in 2003 about a list of problems at the lab, including lack of training, high turnover and inappropriate working spaces.

The memo, which CBC News reported on two weeks ago, showed authorities were aware of serious problems at the lab now managed by the Eastern Health regional authority.

The memo flagged issues two years before Eastern Health disclosed it was having serious problems with hormone receptor tests, which help determine which course of treatment is appropriate for breast cancer patients.

A judicial inquiry is pending on those tests, in which more than 300 breast cancer patients were given wrong results. A class action lawsuit has also been certified by Newfoundland Supreme Court.

Speaking publicly on the issue for the first time, Ejeckam, who now lives in Nigeria, said in an interview that a shortage of pathologists was one of the reasons he wrote his memo.

"Situations where today the results were very good, tomorrow it's a bad result or no result at all, so there is no question that there was no consistency in the testing at that time," Ejeckam told CBC News.

Despite saying he could not trust the Health Sciences Centre lab's results, and that the authority could be legally liable for errors, Ejeckam said he was not pleased with what happened next.

"Well, there was no immediate response," he said.

"There was no question about it. The chairman, the program director ... there was no response to it."

In the spring of 2003, Ejeckam suspended hormone receptor tests for several weeks, to address a number of problems.

A month later, Ejeckam wrote that he was satisfied that the problems with those tests had been solved, although he cautioned that quality control at the lab was still "unsatisfactory."

Earlier this month, Eastern Health released other memos suggesting that problems at the lab were addressed.

In 2005, Eastern Health suspended hormone receptor testing at the lab again and began retesting results dating back to 1997.

Late last year, Eastern Health disclosed that those tests had had an error rate ranging between 10 per