

From: Tansy Mundon
To: Abbott, John; Bonnell, Susan; George Tilley; Hennessey, Moira; Vokey, Sharon, Wiseman, Ross
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Subject: Health authority apologizes for cancer-test confusion

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ST. JOHNS, N.L. — A local health authority in Newfoundland has apologized for the confusion it created when it failed to fully disclose results of a review that found 317 women received the wrong results from faulty breast cancer tests.

George Tilley, CEO of the Eastern Health Authority, says the organization knew more than 300 women had received incorrect results, but it decided to speak publicly about a much smaller group — the 117 patients who had their treatment changed after they were told about the faulty tests.

Mr. Tilley says the authority should have revealed the larger scope of the problem, and he apologized for the confusion that resulted.

"I regret the decision that we didn't simply refer to it earlier," he told a news conference. "And I apologize for the confusion that that caused."

Myrtle Lewis of Roddickton, Nfld., learned the harsh treatment she underwent for breast cancer might have been unnecessary. (Paul Daly for The Globe and Mail)

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He also confirmed the review took much longer than expected, which created additional stress for the patients involved.

"I also appreciate that this issue is causing great anxiety for the patients suffering from cancer and their family members, and we sincerely regret that," Mr. Tilley added.

At least three dozen women in Newfoundland and Labrador who received the wrong test results have died, though it remains unclear how many died as a result of their cancer.

The women missed out on potentially life-saving treatment, such as hormone therapy, but Tilley said it is also unclear how many of them would have benefited from that kind of treatment.

In 2005, the authority arranged for Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto to repeat more than 2,000 hormone receptor tests dating back to May 1997 after oncologists discovered inconsistent results in breast tumour samples.

About 80 women are in the process of launching a class-action lawsuit.

Premier Danny Williams has said the province will launch a review to determine why so many women received the wrong results